

Special Gifts

by Tibki

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Family

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup, Stoick, Toothless

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-08-03 02:19:25

Updated: 2014-08-31 04:10:14

Packaged: 2016-04-26 20:21:07

Rating: T

Chapters: 26

Words: 159,789

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Everyone in the world is born with a Special Gift; something that makes them unique, that makes them feel worthy and makes them worth keeping in a tribe. Hiccup thinks he knows what his Special Gifts are; he was born with them, after all. But is he right? -AR, retelling. Not the sci-fi-esque story this summary implies. Complete as of the thrice-updated epilogue; revision's hard.

1. Chapter 1

****Hey y'all. Guess what I wrote?****

A freaking long HTTYD**** fic.****

****I've been working on it since about March, but refused to post it until it had a beginning, middle, and end; no need to repeat the two-years-no-update nightmare of _Earth Day_. So on the whole, this should be one chapter a day; if I have to skip a day, I'll try and update two the next day to make up for it, but please be aware: I'm at a dig in Ireland until the 16th, and then I have to get everything ready for college, and then I have to begin my sophomore year on the 22nd.****

****But it should be roughly one a day for the next month or so. Hope you enjoy... _Special Gifts._****

CHAPTER ONE****

If I didn't want to risk gaining Oã°in's ire, I'd wonder what kind of ale he'd been drinking when he'd made Ask and Embla, the first human beings.

He had to have been drunk. There's no other explanation. Why else would the god of wisdom leave the Mortal Realm in the hands of such a pathetic species?

I mean, look at the rest of the creatures we share Midgard withâ€”colorful, dangerous, specialized, and excellent at what they do. They've fit themselves perfectly into their environment, making use of everything around them and keeping themselves alive long enough to let their entire species continue. They've got defenses against predators, or ways to escape from them, that let them live to see another day. They're powerful by natureâ€”Jorð blessed them.

Humansâ€”not so much. Whereas everything else is either small enough to miss or big enough to give off a sense of don't mess with me, humans fall into the pit between the two good sizesâ€”we're too big to hide away but small enough to still fit inside the mouths of most carnivores. And that's not the only disadvantage: we're trapped on the land, unable to venture far out into other areas that other creatures can exploit. Fish can swim, take advantage of the seas and the access it gives them to so much below the surfaceâ€”but humans drown. Fast.

Birds flyâ€”humans fall. Faster.

We stink, and can't even tell because our sense of smell is pretty much worthless. We've got long-ish legs, but they're not that powerful; humans aren't built for high speeds. We don't have talons, or fangs, or claws. There's no human venom, no poison or built-in defense that makes us unsavory to anything bigger that might want to eat usâ€”which is pretty much everything that eats meat.

We can't camouflage. We can't hide away in small spaces. We need food pretty much constantlyâ€”but no hibernation for us, so we need to find food in the winter too. Our fur doesn't even cover all of our bodies. And don't even get me started on how vulnerable we are as babiesâ€”little red mammalian worms of squishiness that'll die without at least fifteen years of guidance under their belts.

Nothing less than the will of the gods can have gotten us as far as we have.

Actually, now that I think about it, that's probably exactly what did it. Because people don't have any of what our fellow Midgardians doâ€”nature gave us very little to work with. But while nature gave us our bodies, we were really made by Oðin, the god of seiðrâ€”the god of magic.

Most people don't actually have seiðr, which is good because no one really wants seiðrâ€”the whole magic-thing kinda takes away the pride of war and battle; after all, if you can just magic something into existence, who knows if you're not just poofing up your glory and honor? And then you're thrown into the same boat as Loki and possibly shipped off the edge of the world to boot. But though only a few have a lot of it, with the human race being built from magic, there was a little bit ofâ€”rub-off. On everyone.

Because of Oðin's magic, every human being is born with a Special Gift. Humans as a species are weak, squishy, unprotected and vulnerable to the entire world around usâ€”but every individual has that something extra, a new gem or a vein of ore in the useless rock. It's that oomph that lets a person, in a group, thrive and survive

in a world which has left them so completely undefended otherwise.

It's pretty much unique in everyone. Beauty, charm, wit, an ability, even something materialâ€"you name it, someone's probably had it, has it, or will have it. Most of the time, it's not enough to let a person survive on their own, so groups have to be made. Luckily, people are social creatures anyway.

(Well. Most people are. Mildewâ€|_ and me, I guess.)

Anyway, in Berk, there's all different kinds of Gifts. My cousin Snotlout can fling a hammer farther than some adults. Ruff and Tuff bring their special brand of chaos to the mix. Gobber is a brilliant teacher and has the best collection of prosthetic legs this side of Yggdrasil's branches. Astrid is beautiful and strong-willed, and deadly with her axe. There are great farmers, great families, great warriors, great leaders.

Sometimes these things aren't that noticeable, and even a person's best friend and shield-brother might not know about them. Sometimes, theyâ€"their true selvesâ€"are hidden, like black silk against the night sky. Maybe a boy is actually an excellent singer. Maybe a twin has a soft spot deep down for a person they say they can't stand. Maybe a guy cares more than he lets on, or maybe someone collects ceramic unicorns.

Or maybe you can go faster than anything else ever born.

Most of the time, you know what's yours. Whether it's knitting or killing, having an army or being able to talk one down, people are usually pretty good about knowing what they can doâ€"how they get to that point, though, differs.

Some people know what they can do from birth. They know who they are and what they should becomeâ€|. These lucky few are born with their Gifts. But the gods are warriors, Vikings, and love waging war and going on adventures, and they love seeing mortals do the same. So others?

Others have to find their Gifts themselves.

* * *

><p>When I was six, I earned myself fifteen minutes of fame.<p>

Well, it was more like five days, of acceptance. A short, heavenly time when the others wouldn't ridicule or push me into the mud for being small or weak, when the tribe didn't scold me for everything I did, when my dad smiled down at me.

And then I blew up the storehouse and that was over with.

(Who would've thought that flour could be more explosive than a dragon? That weird, pale mushroom-shaped cloud was in the sky hours after the fire stopped burning.)

((And despite what the village thought, yes, it was actually an accident. That time.))

But oddly enough, I didn't mind the fall from grace as much as I thought I should have. Yeah, it stung to have the entire village laughing at me again, to see that one mistake could easily erase the one good thing I've managed to do in my life—and it had just plain hurt_ to hear my dad wondering into a mug of ale if I was really a child of the Jǫtunn. No, it definitely wasn't a fun experience—but eventually, after all of that, it meant I was relieved of the constant gaze on my back.

See, most Vikings are the most trouble-making people you could ever meet. And Viking _six-year-olds_, even more so. A single one is the equivalent of about five Terrors locked into a small space—screaming, chaotic, and more than likely to bring the house down around them.

Parents encourage that kind of violent, destructive behavior. Most of the time. We wouldn't still have a village if it was all of the time, just a big smoking hole in the ground. So the entire tribe tends to keep an eye or two on any kids running about underfoot, even if they aren't even their own children. It prevents a lot of disasters, because—in help the toddler who got their hands on daddy's longsword.

I, however, never really fell into that category of Viking kid. Spending my first three years living with Grandmother Gothi kept me from the main part of the village, and once I really did start living in the middle of Berk, being scrawny, clumsy, and my general all-around hiccup-ness made me ignorable to the adults. Eyes tended to skip over me, like a rock across water. _Chief's son is breathing, moving on with life—_

During my Five Days of Acceptance, that wasn't true anymore. Since I'd done something worthwhile, people made sure I was actually staying safe, and not just staying alive—adults would watch me the same way they'd watch Snotlout or Astrid, make sure I wasn't about to get killed doing something reckless and stupid again.

The non-stop eyes on my back were annoying, and even though it took the acceptance with it, I was glad to see it go.

I could get time alone again, once it was gone. And being alone meant two things, to my six-year-old mind: _easier to hide_ and _easier to get away_.

Not away from my cousin or the other kids—I didn't exactly enjoy their company, but they rarely did anything overtly mean, since I was the chief's son and all. Being left alone meant I could get away from the village as a _whole_, and that meant I could practice.

Funnily enough, there _were_ a couple people who didn't drop me like a hot stone after the Flour Incident. Gobber, as always—a nice constant at the forge, who took me in as his apprentice even before he knew what I'd done and what I could do—and the Hoffersons. They weren't out-right thanking me anymore, but they didn't scorn me for my mistakes either—and that was better than any 'thank you'.

As I grew up, that would become a pattern. The rest of the village would laugh and shout and sneer, subtly trip and shove me when no one else was looking, and when I accidentally destroyed something, the

whole tribe would glare at me as I was marched back to the house.

Except for the Hoffersons. They'd just pick up their axes and start the reconstruction. They didn't acknowledge me at all, which was still better than anything else. Sometimes, even, Astrid's eyes would meet mine, and we'd look at each other for a secondâ€”just a second, but much longer to me because there was never any scorn in those eyesâ€”before she turned away again.

The Hoffersons owed me, for Erik. It wasn't that I could do no wrong, but that no wrong could unbalance what I'd given them.

They weren't family to me, and I rarely if ever spoke to any of themâ€”but they and Gobber were the only fair islands in a very cold sea for a long time. They reassured me, even in the middle of my spiraling whirlpool of a life, that there was hope and that I wasn't entirely useless.

I was grateful to all of them for this, and the little yellow star that was Astrid in my heart, the one I focused on whenever I shot off to the dark woods with ridicule and derision sticking in my ears like tar, glowed brighter with every year that passed.

* * *

><p>Only one person ever asked what Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third thought he was best atâ€”and that person received a stutter and stammer of surprise that anyone would bother asking about the talents of the village runt. Once that was over with, though, he admitted to being a fair enough blacksmith, though he was still nowhere *near* Gobber's levelâ€”and beyond that, he added with a sarcastic drawl, he was pretty good at running away.

That was an exaggeration. Hiccup was not talented at runningâ€”running was Hiccup's Gift.

Not that it meant much to his villageâ€”what self-respecting Viking ran from anything?

But nonetheless, Hiccup could run. More than that: unlike the others, who were big and bulky, Hiccup was made for running. He had long legs and, though his chest was thin, his lungs were strong. He was thin and lithe, and cut through the air like a whip. Escaping from the kids who liked to take their 'games' outside the purview of the village, where they could freely give the boy bruises without worrying about being spotted by the chief, had made him fastâ€”though not as fast as he was just naturally. No amount of being chased by regular people could make him run faster than he could by birthright.

Running, Hiccup thought, was the closest mankind would ever get to flyingâ€”and his running was even closer than what any other Viking had ever managed.

When he ran, the damp, foggy air that sat on Berk didn't seem so heavy or thick anymoreâ€”it was light, playful. It threaded through his hair like an ethereal comb, playing with every strand and leaving him with a wild look the moment he stopped. He rarely stopped, once he started. His lungs would bring in that bright air, letting it fill

his chest, until he was certain it would lift him off the ground and into the clouds.

Individual beats of his heart disappeared when he was running, turning into a nonstop _ththththth_ buzz that carried blood to his legs just as fast as his feet were covering groundâ€”his breaths replaced the rhythm of his heart, steady and deep so that he could run for ages and never get tired.

The world around him transformed into a blurâ€”no more individual trees looming down on him like enemies ready to strike, no more shadows or hidden crevices, just a smooth mixture of colors and the ever-blue sky above. His feet were his only anchor to the world, and the thread keeping him down was thin but strongâ€”without it, he knew he wouldn't ever leave the sky.

Sometimes he felt so _close_, to the clouds and the racing winds so high aboveâ€”just one misplaced step, onto the wind instead of the earth, and the thread would break and he'd be in the heavens.

Though his feet always hit the ground, Hiccup never really stopped dreaming about what would happen if that threadâ€”| snapped.

He liked to imagine he'd run on the winds to AsgarÃ°. Meet Thor and the other gods, his ancestors. Maybe there, where they already knew, he would have the chance to really prove himself. Maybe there, where they'd see him for what he was but still learn what he could do for _himself_â€”| maybe there they would accept him.

Hiccup had to run barefoot. He discovered that the hard way, when he'd torn his last pair of boots into shreds stopping; there was no leather, wood, or wool sole that could keep up. Not wanting to spend so much on a new pair every dayâ€”or, HlÃ—n protect him, make the shoe-maker _suspicious_â€”Hiccup strapped his boots to his belt when he ran.

He also had to cut himself a new path whenever he ran. He'd used to always use the same forest trails up, down, and around the mountains, every afternoonâ€”the resulting scars in the earth still hadn't entirely healed. When they were found by Mulch, half the village went out on the search for a new, probably flightless, dragon.

Feet going as fast as his did didn't leave very human-like footprints. They just carved a line right down the path, deep into the fertile soil, little indentations where the ball of his foot hit. Hiccup knew he was lucky, when he first saw the others looking them over: the little indents were never full footprints. If they had been shaped like a human's print, the small size and thin shape would've exposed him in seconds and, like his father always told him, it was better to keep everything _secret._

Secretâ€”that when he ran, the fastest eyes couldn't stay on him; that when he took off, Hiccup needed to keep careful control of his speed and distance or else he'd be in the ocean on the other side of the island in an eyeblink.

Secretâ€”that fires grew high and hot whenever he passed them, that he never had any trouble lighting them, that they couldn't burn any vital part of his body. That the fact that he couldn't swim was _more_ than just his normal hopelessness.

Secretâ€”that Thor, son of OÃ°in, had sired his mother Valka; that Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III was _Ã•smegir_, a descendant of the _Ã†sÃ-r_.

Secret, that the scrawny little hiccup son of the chief was, in fact, part god.

* * *

><p>The alarm for dragon attacks was a horn, cut off the largest ram ever born on Berk, centuries ago. This thing was monstrous, almost a foot and a half long, and hollowed out especially for this purpose. When blown, it released a deep, throaty blast of air that had a tendency to shake rafters and masts of poorly-built ships. There were rumors and stories of particularly shoddy craftsmanship that got completely sunk, shaken to pieces by the horn's echoing roll. The sound was immense and unmistakableâ€”there was no possible way even the deepest of sleepers could snore through the Dragon Horn.<p>

So when the skull-shuddering tone washed through my room, making my chest vibrate, I was up like a Night Fury's shot.

This is it.

For as long as I've been alive, there's been this thing behind my chest. I don't have a name for itâ€”I barely can describe it. But every once in a while, when big change is on the horizon or when something dramatic is about to happen on Berk, it tells me.

How it tells me depends: sometimes it twists, like I'd eaten too much or swallowed wrong. Sometimes it pulses, like a dying star. Sometimes it glows with warmth like an ember behind my heart, rattling against the sides of a tough, locked chest.

Today, it was the middle of this radiating sense of clarity. Of absolute certainty.

This is it.

The thought didn't even need conscious effortâ€”it was the first thing I registered, before I processed what was in front of my eyes or that I was even awake. It was in the way my bones settled when I stood on the wooden floor of my loft, and how my heart hammered against my chest without even having been outside in the battle yet. This was the nightâ€”this was _my_ night, the night I would prove myself to my village and my ancestors.

Unable to contain a little dance of excitement, I quickly scrambled for my clothes, trying to make sure not to run too fastâ€”no need to re-floor the loft _again_. Twice a year was enough, thanks.

Bits of the fight outside were audible through my window, and the dragon fires outside were sending a glow through itâ€”it grew brighter and my forearms tingled with heat as I stumbled by it, trying to force my boot on. Shouts for the fire brigade grew louder and more desperate, and I winced, drawing back and away. No need to cause any more deaths than usual.

This is it.

I practically fell down the stairs in my enthusiasm. To be precise and honest, I was lucky not to end up with my teeth embedded in the floor, but that couldn't stop me, because _this was my night!_ _Finally!_

Except I had to curb it when I opened the door to a dragon's head.

I barely had a second to register the Monstrous Nightmare about to spit fire in front of me. Thankfully, barely a second is plenty of time.

The world blurred around me for a fraction of a blink. I grabbed the door and yanked it closed again, the hinges shrieking protest in the too-fast movement. The instant I stopped, the world resettled.

Flames licked around the wooden panels, and I had to fall into a fetal position ball on the floor, covering my arms and legs, as the supercharged heat turned it to ash.

(It felt like a gentle puff of air on my back and neck.)

((Expecting that, Dad wouldn't care much about the fact that I'd been behind it when he discovered that door had been incinerated.))

When it was over, I risked a glance over my shoulder. The Nightmare—a long, almost pretty mix of red and black stripes, its snout like an arrowhead and the four horns just a grey shade off pitch—had landed and was staring at me, and at the door it had obliterated. There was a silent moment before it shook its head like a dog and turned its slitted eyes back to the sheep it had come for.

Still caught by the moment, I slowly uncurled. "Dragons," I murmured, eyes going wide as I looked out into the village.

It was chaos outside—so basically, your typical morning on Berk. Men and women of nearly every age scrambled around the village, brandishing everything from masterly crafted, heirloom swords to bits of broken chairs and tablelegs. No matter what it was or where it came from, it was being used as a weapon against the flying beasts swarming the skies like locusts, only a thousand times bigger and a thousand times more unwelcome.

Practiced, fear-inspiring war cries and draconic roars filled the air like a new kind of fire, angry and clashing like swords. They overpowered the bleats of terrified sheep and the crackles of the real flames, but it was impossible to miss the _crack-BOOM_ of the collapsing houses.

(The village has been here for seven generations, but every single building is new; very modern with all the latest tenth-century furnishings. We'd have the market cornered on real-estate if it weren't for the neighbors.)

((And I'm not just talking about the dragons, either. Cuz, you know. _Vikings_, and all.))

There've been times where I've wondered why we never just—left. It

would be a lot easier to just let the dragons have the island and find somewhere else to live, rather than fighting them off and rebuilding so often.

But, we're Vikingsâ€”forget blood; we have pure, concentrated stubbornness flowing through our veins. It's like vodka, this kind of mead I heard is made in the east. Burning, sharp, and keeps you going strong no matter what's ahead. Who needs a pumping heart when you've got a body full of pigheadedness and sheer spite for Hel herself?

So a little thing like near-nightly raids by fire-breathing lizards bigger than our houses? _Not_ about to separate us for our homeland of the last 300 years.

I ranâ€”walked really, but just a tiny bit faster than normal, since everyone else was aroundâ€”through the crowd of familiar faces, ducking random limbs hauling and hurling weapons every which way. I recognized Gunnar, a ship's captain, as he dropped from a massive, snarling Gronkleâ€”I dodged around him, just in time to duck underneath a log Kneelouse and Pugspit were dragging to the west.

This is why we Hooligans have the motto, _Only the strong belong_. _If it weren't for myâ€”_ reflexes_, skinny little unarmed me would've ended up crushed or bludgeoned to death already twice tonight, and I wasn't even five yards from my house yet. The real fighters have to deal with an entire village filled with this fatal mess of flames, havoc, and bloodlust.

Seems crazy to other people, but yup. Typical Berk morning.

A blur of a person ended up conking his head on the logâ€”I spun around, but couldn't see anything except the furious, churning sea of faces and limbs. Bodies slammed into me from every direction, shoving me left and right and backwards.

I tripped over my own feetâ€”not exactly an uncommon occurrenceâ€”and spun around uncontrollably. A ball of flame hit the ground with a _boom_, the rushing heated air blasting across my face and knocking me onto my back.

"_Raaaaaaaaaagh!_"

The tail end of Gunnar's war cry hit me in the face, full of hatred and spittle. His beard was smoldering. "Mornin'!" he said, grinning. He grabbed my shoulder, hauled me to my feet, and rushed off.

That was the only welcoming greeting I got, and it made me smile the rest of the way to Gobber's shopâ€”past the _What're _you_ doin' out?_ and the _Get back inside!_ dismissals that were so much more the usual offering.

I was most of the way to the smithy when the Nightmareâ€”the same one from beforeâ€”suddenly made a reappearance to my left, throwing sparks and liquid flame in a long fire-line in front of me. Unaccustomed to _stopping_, I would've run straight into the flames had a broad hand not literally plucked me off the ground.

(That happens a lot, when you're 100 pounds wet among a horde of enormous and strong men and women.)

((It's totally never absolutely humiliating. What would give you that idea?))

My father glared down at me as I dangled helplessly in his grip. His green eyes were giving me the same warning I hadn't stopped hearing over the last ten years.

"What is he doin'â€" what are you doin' out? Get inside!" he yelled into the crowd. That same crowd was the only reason he wasn't reminding meâ€"out loudâ€"that I was only so fireproof and that I could still manage to burn to death, and take half the village with me too.

I ran off, hearing him get a read off the situation from Jarnskeggiâ€"Nadders, Gronkles, Zipplebacks, a Nightmare, and no Furies. So far.

(The 'so far' sent a thrill of excitement down my back, and I grinned. The thing in my chest trembled. That could be it.)

The braziers were just starting to be lit and raised, so I abandoned my normal route and cut by them to helpâ€"the flames rose high and burned hot, licking at the scaled but softer stomachs of the dragons flying above. Hopefully no one noticed that they were burning brighter than usual, or that one even started on the wrong endâ€"the end I was coming from, of course.

Hopefully they didn't notice, but when I glanced over my shoulder at my 'work', I still felt happy doing it. It was one of the little things I could do, inconspicuous but still useful. Things like that kept me going.

The smithy came into viewâ€"a simple, open structure with stones for the base of four walls and wood everywhere else, as familiar to me as the back of my hand. See, I'm one of the people lucky enough to have two of somethingâ€"I have two homes, and two men who've basically raised me. Of course, the first in each group are my father and the building I go to sleep in at night.

But I also have Gobber and the forge. Gobber the Belch was a great dragon-slayer back in his day (you know, back in the Pre-Cambrian Era). But after the loss of his left arm and right leg to the beasts, he'd laid down the sword and partially retired.

Now he spends his days the way any old man in the fall of his life doesâ€"swearing, building the weapons other people swing around, and jumping into the fray whenever he feels like everyone else is slacking off. That last one happens a lot.

I've been his apprentices since I wasâ€"well, littl_erâ€"and the forge, with its warmth and smoky air, was my number one childhood haven.

Gobber was already busy when I came in, using his hammer-hand to straighten a sword that looked like it had been rammed against a rocky, impervious Gronkle-hide a few times and then stomped on by the thing for good measure.

"Oh, nice of ya ta join the party!" he called as I stripped off my

coat. "Thought ye'd been carried off!"

Grabbing my (useless) apron and (very extremely important) arm protectors, I went over to the backboard that held his interchangeable arms. "Who, me?_" I asked, stooping to pick up a crushing tool that had fallen off the shelf. It weighed maybe a third of my entire _me_ and hauling it up wasn't easy. I was panting when it was on, but I tossed Gobber a smirk anyway. "I'mâ€"whewâ€"_way_ too muscular for their tastes. They wouldn't know what to do with allâ€"_this_!" I gestured to my thin chest, flexing my arms ineffectively.

Gobber was even less impressed than I was. "Well, they need _tooth_picks, don' they?"

"Ah yes, my master planâ€"get picked up to clean teeth, and stab them through the roof of their mouth when they least suspect it."

"Except ye'll probably clumsy it up an' end up speared on their fangs."

"Anyone ever told you how lovely and optimistic you are?" I drawled, giving him a flat look as I finally tied my apron behind meâ€"my fingers were as clumsy as any other part of me behind my back, so it took forever, but Gobber never let anyone except him work without one on.

Gobber roared at me, a wordless noise full of his Vikingly indignation at being called _lovely_, of all things.

"And forget the lizardsâ€"if I'd gotten here any _faster_, I'd have a fire-breathing _father_ to worry about," I pointed out, raising an eyebrow so he'd get my meaning and getting an agreeing snort.

The doors to the stall were thrown open. With a practiced ease, I grabbed various broken weapons being thrown inside, avoiding every pointy end being shoved at me and taking the whole load over to the coal pile to heat and soften. There I stopped, tapping a rhythm on the sides of the box, keeping close and letting the fire get hotter and hotter with my proximity until it was the right temperature.

Gobber rolled his eyes as the flames grew, but didn't say anything. He wasn't about to complain about having such a usefulâ€"| _talent_ concerning blacksmithing on hand. The massive pair of bellows by the other end of the pile had need repairing for the last three _years_, but it wasn't easy, replacing four broken iron ribs, the nose, and patching the ten or so holes in the leather. Neither of us could be bothered with the time or effort, not with the constant summer raids lately and with winter on its fast approachâ€"we had other things to worry about than a single bellows.

And I worked just as well anyway.

(I never told Gobber that I was the one who broke the dam#ed thing, in a fit of pure exasperation that had nearly blown the chimney to pieces, but I'm fairly certain he knew. He was probably just grateful the bellows were the _only_ victim; he hated having to rebuild the forge.)

"_Fire!"_ someone yelled, and I jumped at the sound, spinning on my heel to look outside the shop.

Berk's fire brigade, composed of the those unfortunate souls considered too old to be huddling scared inside but too young for dragon training, broke into actionâ€"Fishlegs Ingerman, a big bulky boy who'd almost been a friend to me years ago; the Thorston twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut, identical and vicious; my cousin Snotlout, mean-spirited and thick-skulled; and Astrid, the powerful and beautiful leader. They all dragged buckets of water from an immense wooden barrel towards the flaming homes, cheering themselves on as a team.

(Tradition dictated that the son of the chief be head of the brigade until he was old enough for dragon training. But thanks to my little Gift for flames, making me head of the fire brigade would be the equivalent of replacing the water buckets with barrels of kerosene.)

They ran back and forth with new loads, valiantly attempting to salvage what they could of the burning pitch, wood, and straw. Astrid was calm and collected, determination in her eyes as steely as her shoulder guards as she bucketed water again and again onto the flames. She stood and ran confidently, shoulders back and carrying the weight with ease and grace, never faltering in a single step. She was a Valkyrie facing another battle among a hundred, meeting the situation with an open mind, a strong heart, and a practiced arm; brave, ruthless, cunning.

She was_ perfect._

(I couldn't help but stare.)

Unfortunately, all their work was pretty much pointless, as the next blast of Nadder fire exploded up and outwards, eating through the house with twice the normal speed and heat. Metal clamped onto my collar and I was lifted bodily into the air, away from the scene.

(Second time tonight. Still humiliating.)

"Hiccup," Gobber warned.

"Oh, c'mon!" I most certainly did _not_ whine. "Please let me out? I need to make my mark!"

"You _have_ made marks," my master for the last eight years said. "Like the scorch marks in the boathouse, the blast-'oles in the Great Hall's walls, an' the complete destruction of _'ow_ many catapults?"

Only four. "Just for two minutes!" I nonetheless begged as he released me, letting me hit the ground with a soft thump. I backed up towards my corner of the smithy. "I'll kill a dragonâ€"my life will get _infinitely_ betterâ€"I might even get a girl to look at me!"

"Ye can't lift a hammer," Gobber pointed out, "ye can't swing an axeâ€"ye can't even throw one o' these!" He held up a set of bolas, the weights clanking together dully.

Someone outside the stall grabbed the ropes from Gobber's hand and tossed them, capturing a Gronkle and bringing it down. Gobber didn't even flinch at the sudden lack of weapon in his gripâ€”during a raid, no one could fault you for grabbing anything that might save your or another's life. At the shop, we were all too used to having newly- or even just half-repaired swords, axes, bolas, hammers, everything, snatched right out of our hands.

(Once, a person grabbed and threw me alongside a hammerâ€”just don't ask me what happened when I hit the ground. I'll say it wasn't the most pleasant experience, and leave it at that.)

"Okay fine," I had to admit that point, because all of the above were true, "but this will throw it for me!"

I stepped back and motioned to the product of five weeks' hard workâ€”the Mangler, shaped a bit like an over-sized crossbow. It shot my painstakingly modified-for-maximum-impact-and-disfigurement bolas farther and faster than any Viking could throw.

Those five weeks had been spent constructing itâ€”shaping the wood and metal perfectly, calibrating it out in the forest where no one would lose a limb or headâ€”but the research had taken nearly three months. I'd had to look over the various bolas we used to capture dragons, how rope flew as opposed to sturdier but heavier chain; what kind and how much weight was best; if a net was feasible, or if blades could be worked into the lines somehow to damage the catch and make it safer to kill once it was down.

I'd broken down and studied crossbows, catapults, observed how they flew through the air. I'd had to scrap three different forms of the base, never mind the actual shooting mechanismâ€”and now it was finished, perfect in every way and ready to start bringing dragons down, and me up.

There was no way it was a coincidence that night that thing behind my heart was making me so certain fell on the first raid it was ready for use in. And, even better, those three months had also been spent watching one particular dragon very, very closelyâ€”I knew exactly what that Night Fury was going to do tonight, and I was ready and prepared to bring it down.

It would be wonderful.

I must've put my hand in the wrong spot, because suddenly it releasedâ€”the bola knocked Ack out cold just outside.

Oops.

Gobber was decidedly unimpressed. That was pretty normal, actually. "See, now this right hereâ€”"

"It's a mild calibration issue, I can fix that!"

"No, no Hiccup!" I jumped when he shouted, surprised. Gobber sighed and shook his head. "Fix it, ye probably couldâ€”I can't say ye're not a dam# good smith without lyin' through my fake tooth." I blushedâ€”Gobber didn't compliment easily.

"But bein' a Viking isn't about this." He gestured to the Mangler, which was sitting there looking entirely too innocent. "It's about this!"

He took a finished sword and threw it out to a villager, who raised it over her head and went after a Zippleback with a battle-cry. Despite myself, I winced and flinched away, not wanting to see blood hit the grassâ€”though there was no avoiding the screech-squelch as the steel pierced scales, and the dying roar of agony. I frowned and tried to beat myself back upâ€”Vikings didn't tremble at the idea of death. Vikings loved battle, loved gore.

Gobber, completely unbothered, ignored my flinch. "Guts an' glory! Taking down something with yer hands, pluckin' eyeballs an' feelin' blood steam on yer skin!"

My stomach roiled at the prospect. I clenched my jaw. Vikings love gore, Vikings love gore, you are a Viking so you love gore.

He put his good hand on my shoulder, probably seeing me green slightly. "If you ever want to get out there, and fight dragons, you need to stop allâ€”| this."

But his hand and hook weren't pointing at the Mangler. "You just gestured to all of me!"

"Yes!" he said, smiling and shoving me happily, nearly knocking me to the ground. "Tha's it! Stop being all of you!"

I narrowed my eyes. "Oooh, I see how it is."

"Do ye now?"

"Yes, and you, sir, are playing a dangerous game," I warned him, raising a finger to his unmoved face. "Keeping this much rawâ€”| Vikingness contained? There will be consequences!"

Gobber didn't blink. "I'll take my chances," he said, lifting up the sword he'd been working on earlier. "Sword, sharpen, now."

The weapon probably weighed half as much as my whole body did, and only plenty of experience and scars from similarly heavy and pointy things kept me from dropping it. I still sagged under the weapon, and the tip hit the floor dully, but I didn't immediately go to the grindstone.

"Gobber." My voice certainly did not crack, but my tone got him to turn around anyway. "This is it for me. Iâ€”I can feel it."

The older man visibly hesitated. Weâ€”me, my dad, and Gobberâ€”we don't talk much about myâ€”| heritage. I feel no scruples in taking advantage of the Gifts it's given meâ€”it's not like anyone else has ever hesitated using anything else as inborn as limbâ€”but it's source? Wasn't something we really ever acknowledged.

It's mostly understood that we don't think about it because it's easier to keep it a secret that way. But sometimes, part of me thinks it's really because even my dad can't really believe it.

And while most days, I could barely believe it myself, there really wasn't any denying the surety settling into my bones like beach sand, or the way the thing glowed, tight and warm in my chest. "This is my night," I told Gobber, and I was certain of every word.

Gobber knew as much about the gods as any good Viking^{â€}and knew more about me than I think I knew about me. He listened when the thing said something, and he knew that I wasn't really going to let anything keep me inside tonight.

He took a slow breath. "â€|Fine. If it gets quie' enough, then ye can go out. But not until I say so!" he added sharply, when a grin burst over my face. "You hear me, lad?"

"But Gobber^{â€}!"

"Ah! Ah ah ah! No buts in my smithy that aren' covered in skivvies!" He waved his fake arm in my face. "If it's really yer night, then it doesn't mat'er when ye get out there, now does it? Now go sharpen that sword!"

That was as good as I was getting. Not entirely discouraged, I hefted the sword and moved it to the whetstone, making sure to keep my arms away from the white-hot, painful to look at sparks.

I was entirely focused on my task^{â€}trying to make sure the metal wouldn't crack, melt, or split under the heat, while keeping a firm stance to keep the edges balanced and a steady hand to make them sharp^{â€}when a piercing, telling whistle surged through the air.

Whhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeee

It was probably some strange extra of my^{â€}| inheritance, but my ears have always picked that sound up long before anyone else. It was another one of those little ways for me to help; if Dad or Gobber saw me react to it, before they themselves could hear it, they could give everyone another half-second's worth of time to prepare.

Gobber noticed me when I looked at the window, and shouted.

"Nigh^{â€}!"

"Night Fury!" a Viking down at the docks screamed.

"Get down!" someone else added, just a half-second too late.

EEEEERROOAAAAA

BOOM

There was a huge starburst of light and sound, blue and yellow and a bit of purple. Night Fury shots are the only kind to explode, but when they do^{â€}|

"Aah!" I yelled as pain stabbed into my temples, dropping the half-finished sword. Just like its warning shriek, the short cry the dragon gave just before it loosed one of its deadly precise shots was

ten times louder to me than to anyone elseâ€”everyone else heard a sharp whistle, but I was left with the grating _scree_ of a dull sword against rusty plate metal.

The terrible sound always reverberated into my chest, like when an explosion would knock a man back even if they weren't anywhere near it. It made the thing behind my heart _jump_, and I was always left a little numb in my fingertips from shock, when the Night Fury blew something to pieces.

When my hearing had recovered enough, I stood back up and went to the window to look out. As usual, there was no sign of the creatureâ€”no white sheep flying through the air or any colorful scale. All that was left of its quick, fatal attack was the smoke that choked out a few of the stars, and the distinctive blue flames that were eating through one of the catapults.

Now that I was on guard, the second and third blasts it used to bring the catapult down all the way were easier to bearâ€”it wasn't exactly relaxing in Gimli's, but I'm a Viking; I could take it.

With the knowledge that it _was_ out there tonight, everything about tonight lined up perfectlyâ€”_The Mangler_, the Fury, and the thing in my chest. I grinned brightly, fingers twitching with a sudden energy.

The certainty I felt settled deeper. _The Night Fury._

I grinned and jumped where I stood. _I _knew_ I'd be the one to kill it!_

Excited, I shot across the smithyâ€”the walls blurred for a fraction of a second and my feet thumped a loud staccato rhythm into the wooden floor.

"Gobber!" I yelled, stopping right next to him.

The older Viking leapt where he stood, battle-readiness crossing his face for an instant. "Hiccup!" he growled when he saw it was me, and the battle-rage faded into his normal anger. "What did we tell ya about doin' tha'?"

I winced and glanced away, shuffling where I stood. "Uhâ€”not to." All three of us had had a long talk about my running up to them at full speedâ€”from their perspective, I just _appeared_ right at their sides, and it had the bad habit of giving them heart attacks.

(They don't really have a right to complainâ€”they suffer heart attacks, I suffer axes being thrown my way on instinct. It's a mutual trade-off of nearly killing each other, in my opinion.)

"But Gobberâ€”!"

He shook his head. "Sorry Hicca, ye can't go out there right nowâ€”an' stop with that!" he barked, grabbing at my hands, which I just realized had been twitching in a blur the way they did when I got overly excited. Gobber gave me a glare, and when I smiled sheepishly back at him, he scoffed. "There's no way ye're leavin' this smithyâ€”ferget quiet, it's bad enough tha' they need _me_ out there."

Gobber exchanged his hammer-hand for a double-bladed battleaxe. "Ye're mannin' the fort," he said as he hobbled out the door (faster than you'd expect a man with only one knee to go). At the last moment, he glanced back. "Stay," he ordered, pointing at me. "Put. There. An' don' even _think_ about leavin'". _Yrraaaaaaggh!_"

With that lovely farewell holler, he ran into the fray. I was left alone with no less than eight warriors waiting in a line at the stall, and a Night Fury in the skies above.

I should be rewarded for my consideration for my eldersâ€"I waited nearly ten seconds before grabbing the Mangler and heading out.

(_Nearly_ ten seconds. Rounded up.)

* * *

><p>The least occupied part of the battlefield that the village had devolved into was the upper hills. This was where the huts of the Chief and his closest relatives (meaning me, my dad, and my uncle Spitelout's family) stood. These houses were usually left alone, because Dad was the best fighter on the island, and if a dragon went after the house, he took it a little personallyâ€"the last Nightmare that tried now had its skull hanging over the front door as warning. The braziers and torches were lit where the fighting was, so the sky above the hills was dark and speckled with the stars that the smoke and light choked out down by the docks.<p>

It was frustrating, to be out of sight of the tribe and _still_ have to keep myself from full-out running to a place for a shot. But _The Mangler's_ wheels couldn't take that kind of speed. So, after an eternity of "running", I reached the place that I _knew_, from months and even years of observing the Fury, was the best spot to shoot the thing down.

You see, unlike any other dragon species, Night Furies (possibly even _the_ Night Fury, no one really knew how many there were as _no one had ever seen one_) never went for the food. They didn't go after houses or ships. They didn't attack individual Vikings or even groups. Even when warrior targeted _it_, the blue flames never hit the Earth or the men directly. It never even _aimed_ for them.

The only thing Night Furies shot at were the catapults, and the one that had come down minutes ago was the second to last.

So, naturally, I pointed the Mangler at the shimmering sky above the only major weapon against dragons left to Berk.

I primed it, opening the long body and pulling out the cannon. It locked into place and I let the bowstaves snap out before setting the string. The target flipped up and I peered through it, forcing my fingers to stop tapping eagerly in a blur against the wooden handlesâ€"it shook the whole thing too much for me to aim right.

"Gimme something to shoot at, gimme something to shoot at, gimme something to shoot atâ€" I muttered under my breath instead.

The night was silent above me. Stars twinkled peacefully, silver and yellow and red against blackâ€”if it weren't for the dragon raids, I'd be out here more often to enjoy the view. Unfortunately, the things liked to attack during the precious few semi-dark hours we got in the summertime.

Gmot was sleeping, so there was no silvery blanket of moonlight, but the Bifrost took its place as the greatest and brightest thing in the heavensâ€”you could tell it was getting later in the year because you could actually _see_ it. It was milky and smooth in a ribbon across the sky, speckled with brighter stars every now and then. There was no one around for two hundred yards in every direction, so the tough grass that manage to grow here glowed in the light. It was calm and serene, a slight sea breeze spraying cool and salty across my face. If you could ignore the yellow and orange haze of battle in the west, the light echoes of war just in the range of hearing, it was just a simple and beautiful night. The huts stood like bastions and cast long, obsidian shadowsâ€”the skulls decorating them turned those shadows into motionless, silently looming black dragons.

But quiet or not, I didn't let my guard down. It was _going_ to happen tonight.

I didn't have to wait long.

There was a soft, ringing echo of soundâ€”I didn't know if it came from the creature's mouth or if it was the air rushing through its wings, but with no other dragon in sight, it had to be the Night Fury.

I shifted my stance and squinted into the sky, focusing and forcing myself into a calm and steady stanceâ€”I had one shot to prove I wasn't useless, and I _couldn't_ let _anything_ screw it up again.

It was impossible to see any dragon that could be there, in the darkness NÃ³tt had thrown over Berk, but there was somethingâ€”

â€”deep in my chest, it was reaching out and _touching_â€”

_Whhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee_â€”

My hands twitched, unable to stay steadyâ€”but it wasn't any normal twitch, it lined up with the sensation in my chestâ€”and I fired exactly as the purple bolt hit the tower.

The _Mangler_ released, and the recoil sent me sprawling into dirt. The bolas whistled as they flew, the pitch rising and falling in a quick _whipwhipwhip_ as the weights swung. The thing behind my heart clenched in a sudden ache as a pained screech cut through the night's silence.

I scrambled up. A heavy black shape fell into the dim grey surrounding the red glow that the sun left, just below the horizon in the Eastâ€”off Raven's Point.

_Oh great __O__Ã”__in All-Father._

I'd hit it.

"I hit it," I realized numbly, barely able to believe it. "I-I did it. I can't believe it!" "yes! Yes, I _hit it_!"

I leapt to my feet, shouting my victory to the skies. Here it was, proof! Finally, _proof_! I wasn't a failure to my father, or-or to my line! I, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, had taken down the king of all the dragons!

A Night Fury was down, and _I had done it_!

"Did _anybody_ see that?" I asked, spinning around. Witnesses were everythingâ€"witnesses meant I'd be able to prove it. The gods knew my word wasn't enough, not to a village I'd nearly razed a hundred times.

But no one was there. There wasn't _any_â€"oh.

"Ex-cept for you," I said to the Monstrous Nightmare licking its jaws. I could read its mindâ€"it was looking at me like I was a prime piece of mutton just _waiting_ to be cooked.

Adrenaline launched my mind into overdrive, crossing out options faster than I could blink. I was _way_ too close to the tribe to risk going full speed, and there were still the tracks I'd leave. My affinity for flames would only kill me _quicker_ when the thing set itself on fire. Even if I _were_ armedâ€"_The Mangler_" had only a single shot and was useless nowâ€"I'd be hopeless against it.

One option left.

"_HELP!_"

I spun on my heel and booked it, as fast as I could risk. Everything in meâ€"thrumming heart and screaming terrorâ€"was _shrieking_ for me to take off, get as far away from danger as possible. But I couldn't, I couldn't couldn't couldn't, because then people would _know_ and they could never _know_, so I forced myself to keep a slow pace. No matter how _terrified_ I was of that dragon, I couldn't risk my secret.

The Nightmare came after me. Its claws gouged into the earth with every heavy step and its jaws snapped with dull _clacks_ of teeth larger than my shin.

Gurgles, wet splats, and the prickling I got in the back of my neck when fires were being lit were my only warning for when it decided it wanted its dinner well-done. I tried to bring up what little knowledge I'd scraped together over the years about running from dragons and zigzaggedâ€"tripping over my own feet, but still avoiding the sparking, fiery saliva it kept spitting.

Something long and tall caught my eyeâ€"the pole of one of the braziers. Made from sturdy, old-growth oak, it was reinforced with iron around the base, for situations like this.

Well, not really. But it was good enough for me!

I ran for it, thanking every god above (for the first time in memory)

for my inexplicably thin, un-Vikingly shape, because it fit behind the narrow pole perfectly.

It was quiet for a second, and I prayed to Loki that it had lost sight of me and just given up.

My neck prickled.

Everything blurred as I yanked my arms under my chest, curling over my legs by dropping into another ball—just in time, as the Nightmare's stream of fire burned right around the metal, partly melting it, and would've turned my arms and legs into ash.

"Hiccup!"

The soft, harmless touch of flames on my back stopped in an instant, and I looked over to the voice. My dad was running towards me, and the look on his face made me freeze, terror spiraling from my crown to my toes.

(The reason only Vikings, of all people, have ever lived on Berk? We're the only people who are just as scary as the reptiles next door. It's a neighborhood thing, I guess.)

He leapt over me in a feat of acrobatic prowess a man his size shouldn't have been able to achieve, and grabbed the horns of the dragon that had been inches from taking a bite from me.

Viking and dragon fell a few yards away, both rolling to their feet and settling in for battle. I glanced back the way he came and saw a crowd coming—I had to get out of the scorched earth under my feet, or they'd get suspicious.

I stepped (tripped) off the sooty, burnt ground, and watched as the Nightmare and my father squared off. The dragon was out of shots, and I could almost see panic spark in its gaze once it realized. A ridiculous idea, that it might be praying to some dragon-god, came to mind.

I was halfway to dismissing that before I realized—if I'd been up against my dad?

Human, dragon, or anything in between, _Hel yes_ would I be praying.

Case in point: Dad beat the five _thousand_ pound reptile away and back into retreat with his bare hands.

Then he turned to me, and my own prayers started.

"Uh—| sorry, Dad."

He narrowed his eyes and I took a step back—just an inch too close to the still smoldering pole.

The fire on the side burst high and hot, and cut right through what remained of the support-pole. I flinched at the sudden light, winced at my mistake, and gaped with the crowd as the enormous bowl of flames it had been holding up fell.

The torchâ€"wider than Dad's and Gobber's heights put together and now burning brighter than SÃ³lâ€"slammed right into the boardwalk that connected the lower and upper towns, crushing it to splinters and nearly taking a villager with it. It rolled, like a dropped coin, lazily setting fire to a few houses before coming down directly on a group of netted Nadders. The net burned through with the super-hot flames, and the dragons lifted off, taking our sheep with them.

To summarize: one wrong step resulted in one destroyed brazier, one crushed boardwalk, four burning roofs, eight sheep gone. Disaster and destruction brought down on everything I touched.

Yup. Typical Berk morning.

_Maybe this _wasn't_ my nightâ€"|_

Until I remembered. "Okay, but I hit a Night Fury!"

Dad grabbed my shoulder, his vice of a hand dragging my through the crowd of astonished and muttering villagers. I ignored them, like usualâ€"no doubt they were calling me _cursed_ and _Loki's child_ againâ€"and just focused on staying grateful that he wasn't bodily carrying me away.

(Two was my quota for the night. I'd hate to overachieve.)

Gratitude, however, didn't mean I wasn't going to have bruises on my shoulder in the morning. "Owâ€"it's not like the other times, Dad!" I said, because I'd told him the last set of tracks I'd left, starting a "dragon" hunt, had been because I thought I saw a Night Fury. But, sticking with the typical-ness of the morning, he ignored anything I said and kept marching me away. "I really hit it this time! You guys were busy and I had a clear shot," no need to tell him it was a twitch; I am _not_ a screw up tonight! "and it went down, just off Raven's Point! We should get a search party out there before itâ€" "

"STOP!"

My dad is a Viking. So my dad is, naturally, loudâ€"but rarely is that volume directed at me, so I froze, glancing nervously at the crowd surrounding us. The few times he _did_ yell at me, he sometimes said things that (I hope) he didn't meanâ€"if he said the wrong thing in front of all these peopleâ€"|

"Justâ€"stop," he said, quieting down a little. I relaxed some. "Every time you step outside, _disaster_ falls!" I flinched, knowing it was true. "Can you not see that I have bigger problems? Winter is almost here, and I have an _entire_ village to feed!"

Guilt curled around my heart, dripping burning poison onto it like the legendary snake onto Loki. But Vikings didn't pay attention to little things like that. "Well, uhâ€"|the village could do with a little _less_ feeding, if you know what I mean?"

That seemed to really piss him off. "This isn't a _joke_, Hiccup!" he yelled. "Urghâ€"why can't you follow the simplest orders?"

I had an answer this timeâ€”really, I did, but how in Baldr's name was I supposed to explain my surety about tonight with the entire tribe around us? "Iâ€”Iâ€”I couldn't stop myself!" I tried, gesturing widely and pleading that he listened. "I saw the opportunity, saw a chance, saw a dragon, and I had to, I had to justâ€”kill it! You know? It'sâ€”who I am, Dad."

There. If he didn't get that hint, that boulder from the story he liked to tell about What a Viking could do! had left more brain damage than I'd thought.

"Oiâ€”you're many things, Hiccup," he said, closing his eyes and cradling his skull like I was just another minor headache. Brain damage it was. "But a dragon-killer is not one of them."

That one stung. I'd spent years being toldâ€”by himâ€”that killing dragons was the only worthwhile thing to do as a Viking on Berk. Hurt, I opened my mouth, but he brushed me off. "Get back to the house." He looked over my slumped shoulder, probably at Gobber. "Make sure he gets there! I've his mess to clean up."

Sure enough, Gobber's tell-tale wobbling step came up behind me and he whacked me lightly (his version of lightly, which left me with a knot) on the head as we started to walk up the hill. The hit was punishment for disobeying, and seemed to me like kicking a boy who was already downâ€”I knew he wouldn't see it that way. He never really did.

The crowd divided as we passed through, disappointed and angry glances being shot in my direction. Nothing was outwardly said or done, of course, because Gobber was beside me and my dad was still the Chief, but just the looks on their faces had me turning my eyes to my toes. Best way to not get hurt was to pretend they weren't there. Experience told me that, though experience also told me even the best way didn't stop the embarrassment entirely.

We passed the fire brigade during my Walk of Shame (which was a weekly event by this point, by the way). Ruffnut was laughing, the sound, well, rough, and explosive. "Quite the performance," Tuffnut commented, his brows low and smirk high.

"I've never seen anyone mess up that badly before!" Snotlout's voice was familiarâ€”a familial torment from age about three days to the present. "That helped!"

"Thank you, thank you, I was trying. So." I kept walking, useless and cursed making their usual rounds through my mind. Behind me, I heard Gobber rip into them for standing around like frogs on a muddy stump while their village was burning.

A blonde lock of hair caught the corner of my eye, and I turned to see Astrid walking towards the brigade barrel. As usual, she hadn't joined in in their game of Kick-The-Hiccup. No Hofferson ever said a word against meâ€”not since Erik, all those years ago.

When she glanced back at Gobber, her visible blue eye was as icy, flat, and unemotional as ever. Our eyes met for a single moment, and then she turned away and started to work, and I was left to finish my Walk.

* * *

><p>SÃ³l was on her way to rising when we got near the house, the sky pinking and more of it turning grey-blue with every passing second. The light made seeing the chip on my shoulder easier.<p>

"He never listens!" I complained. "Tell me that I didn't give him more than enough hints! I did everything I could except shout it out to him, but no, why would he ever actually think I had a reason! Not even a single second, to think that I didn't just come out there to screw things up like I always do! He never listens!"

"Runs in the family," Gobber muttered, and I ignored that just on principle.

"And on those rare, Frigg-given moments that he actually does hear what I say," I continued, "it's always with this disappointed scowl, like someone skimped on the meat in his sandwich." I threw my shoulders back and deepened my voice and accent to imitate him. "Excuse me, barmaid! I'm afraid you've brought me the wrong offspring! I ordered an extra-large boy with beefy arms, extra guts and glory on the side! An Ã•smegir! This here, this is a talking fishbone!"

"Don't say that out loud!" Gobber warned me sharply. I flinched, and then paled. A quick glance around told me no one was around to hear, but my heart rate didn't slow for a while yet. "Now," he said levelly, "Ye're thinkin' about this all wrong. It's no' so much what ye look like, but what's inside that he can' stand."

Ladies and Gentlemen, the man who basically half-raised me. I stared at him incredulously. "Thank you for summing that up."

"Look, Hiccaâ€"what I'm sayin' is, ye should stop tryin' so hard ta be somethin' ye're not."

My shoulders slumped. "But it's what I'm supposed to be," I said, and fine, maybe my voice did crack here. I didn't even really notice, too lost and confused and upset. "Myâ€"my grandfâ€| I'm supposed toâ€|" I glanced back at him miserably, and here was the truth: "I just wanna be one of you guys," I said, before turning to go inside.

The house still didn't have a door.

I sighed. "I'll fix that in the morning," I muttered, scrubbing at my face. I stepped over the pile of ash in the threshold and went up the stairs, listening carefully. A few seconds and a tired sigh later, the telltale clack-step-clack of Gobber's feet on the stone path back to the village told me it was safe.

Seconds later, I was carrying a notebook and running high speed through the forest.

* * *

><p>What's this? A story written with inputs of actual Norse mythology? ~_gasp~_ **Amazing! Rare! Awesome!**

****Probably not entirely accurate! Even taking an artistic license into account!****

****I tried, but while I'm fairly good at research, I'm not always the best at understanding everything. So, if you ever, ever, EVER see a mistake (spelling, grammar, plot hole, OOC, mythology, culture, _anything_) feel more than free to point it out in a review!****

****Some people might point out that Hiccup's a little OOC even just now; I beg your forgiveness if it's too bad, but if it's just a bit, please keep in mind that this is a slightly different Hiccup from normal. Dreamworks' Hiccup deals with pressure from his father and tribe; Tibki's Hiccup deals with the weight of a secret and the expectations of being a Norse-style demi-demi-god.****

****If you'd like some more professional opinions on Viking life (and possibly mythology) go talk to dyannehs on Tumblr. Seriously awesome chick, seriously awesome Viking information.****

****Most chapters will be about this long (20 pages on Microsoft Word; see why I've been working on it since March?) and there's about thirty of them. Bits and pieces aren't too well written (the first part, at the top of the page) and I might rewrite those.****

****Questions? Comments? Flames? Place all into the box below-except for troll flames. Those will be promptly doused with the water of my cold, cold shoulder for numpties.****

****Until tomorrow,****

****PEACE,****

****~Tibki****

2. Chapter 2

****Hey y'all, here's today's chapter!****

****Remember how I was saying that most chapters would be the same length as the first? Turns out I mis-counted. Chapter One was 25 pages long, but this guy and all chapters following are 10, with some wiggle room.****

****I only got up an hour and a half ago (it's 2:30 PM where I am). I was expecting to wait until later to publish it, but then I slept for 12 hours so I guess now _is_ later... Oh well. At least I'm well rested! :)****

****SO MANY THANKS TO THOSE WHO HAVE READ, REVIEWED, AND/OR FOLLOWED THIS STORY. YOU'RE ALL LOVELY AND WONDEROUS AND LOV-ONDEROUS.****

****Oh, and I forgot last time: DISCLAIMED. I AM MAKING NO MONEY. NO COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT INTENDED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER TWO_

The Isle of Berk, to me, is shaped something like an oval drawn by a wobbly hand, or an immense loaf of bread that some god had taken a big mouthful from, the edges of the bite-mark sharp and pointed inwards. The _village_ of Berk is settled on the intact edgeâ€”perched on cliffs of limestone and soil that fall to the sea in ragged, fertile steps.

(Others in the tribe describe the island as shaped like a loogie, but since a loogie can be any shape, depending on what angle it hit the ground, and because it's a little gross, I don't like using that idea.)

There are three mountains on Berk, if you didn't count the small spires of limestone that rise from the land every so often. Two form the bay on the opposite side of the island from the villageâ€”the tips of the crescent bite-mark. The third is the tallest, and stands alone to the northeast, surrounded by steppes and limestone spires of its own. That was Raven's Point, named for the dark granite that makes up the tipâ€”the soil up there was worn away by the storms of Thor and the sea's winds, long ago.

It was said that the mountain was Huginn and Muninn's perch, and that anyone brave enough to climb its peak would receive OÃ°in's praise and wisdom through the two ravens. I've been up there plenty of times, but I've never gotten any kind of preternatural wisdom from the birds.

(As far as I know. They are the Birds of Thought and Memoryâ€”who knows? Maybe they could make me forget them.)

Either way, it was there that I ran to start my search.

(Well. After maybe an hour of just blindly sprinting from shore to shore a few thousand times. Running always made me feel a little better after a Walk of Shame.)

Had I been tied to the same laws of speed and nature that held the rest of the island in check, it would've taken me all morning to search the island. Luckily, I wasn'tâ€”but that seemed to be the end of my good fortune.

By the time I'd made my third run up, down, and around the entire mountain, I was ready to tear my hair out. The map of the island, in the notebook I'd brought from the house, was covered in charcoal X's from places I'd already checked over.

A horrible thought came to mindâ€”what if it'd missed the island altogether? Raven's Peak was on a narrow strip of land, relative to the rest of the island. What if the thing had missed, crashed into the sea and drowned? Its body would be carried away to fall off the edge of the world, with no evidence for me to ever find.

The idea froze me where I stood, heels digging into the earth. My feetâ€”bare as they always were when I was running, my boots dangling off a hook in my beltâ€”kicked up two square feet of dirt at the sudden stop.

If the body was gone, then I had _nothing._ No proof that I'd finally

done it, and that meant no acceptance from the villageâ€_ever_, if there really was only one Night Fury out there.

My dad would never look at me with anything but disappointment in his eyes. I'd never become a great dragon-killer and a greater Viking. I'd be Hiccup the Useless until the day I entered Niflheim.

Dread curled in my chest. It would always be this life for me, then. Shame and destruction, and dishonoring my ancestors. Stuck alone, probably living in Mildew's house after the old man died. Hiccup the Useless, left alone because he'll wreck everything otherwise.

Forever.

"Oh gods." I groaned and ran a hand through my short-sheared hair, snapping the book closed with the other. Frustrated and a little scared, I started walking through the forest, lamenting to the enormous trees, standing like soldiers around me, and to whoever was watching above. "Oh _gods_â€why do you hate me? Some people lose their knife, or their mugâ€why am I the one to lose an entire _dragon_?"

"Is it because of the eclipse? And the storm?" I had to wonder. I'd heard about it often enoughâ€how my birth had come packaged with the disappearance of SÃ³l and a sudden thunderstorm, signs of the worst kind. Dad had told me the storm was my mother's, but I don't know how much I really believed that. With every new wrecked house and torch, it seemed more and more likely that Thor was more upset by my birth than Mom's death. "Did _that_ doom me to this kind of life?"

The woods were foggy and not exactly quietâ€my voice echoed and came back to me, and what birds hadn't fled south yet rang songs through the heavy air. But there wasn't any answer for me, not from the skies, or AsgarÃ°, or any of the other Realms.

My teeth clenched, anger rearing its ugly head. "If you're gonna stick me with it, you might as well tell me why!"

I slapped a tree branch that was in my wayâ€and didn't duck quick enough to dodge the thing as it came flying back, whacking me in the face. The sharp pine twigs and needles whacked me in the face, leaving tiny scrapes across my cheeks.

"Ow!"

I rubbed my face and looked upâ€then froze.

The thing was one of the old-growth trees on Berkâ€unlike many of the islands this far north, we have a lot of big trees, which is how the tribe gets most of its wealth when Trader Johann drops by, exchanging timber for goods. It was enormous, probably a hundred feet at its highest, and half as wide around as my entire house.

Its size, however, wasn't what caught my eye. What made me stare was the fact that even though it had been so huge, the tree was _splintered_, like any other skinny crossbow bolt.

Berk's strong summer winds had broken trees before, but this wasn't like thatâ€the break was too sharp, and none of the other trees

around it were broken either. No, this was more like the product of an especially selective devastating winter blizzardâ€"this single tree was pretty much in three pieces, the largest bit still hanging on but was bent badly from the vertical it had been, leaning down and hitting earth.

Flying iciclesâ€"yes, that had happened beforeâ€"could've done this. If the icicle was the size of a horse. And anyway, this was summer, and that split was freshâ€"the smell of sap and freshly cut wood was still heavy in the air. Summer storms did not have a habit of producing icicles, and summer winds were not strong enough to carry them like icy javelins.

In fact, until Devastating Winter swung by, nothing would be going through the air fast enough to do thatâ€|

Nothing exceptâ€|

Mouth hanging loose, I turned and saw a deep rut in the groundâ€"deeper than any I'd ever made myself, bringing up fertile black soil from underground. The trees around it were cut in half, and it stopped just over a hill. It looked like the site of a crash landing.

So it couldn't really be anything else, could it?

Barely daring to hope, I carefully made my way into the rut and over to the hill, tripping over a few broken roots. As I walked, something inside my chest twanged, like a muscle spasm, and I absently rubbed my sternum, too busy staring at the destruction around me to really notice. There were claw marks on the nearby wood, roots and trees bothâ€"it had to be it. I knew it was.

Crouching against the broken earth made my knees damp, but it let me have a peek over the crest of the hill. I gasped and pulled back down.

Black and hugeâ€"that was it.

There wasn't any soundâ€"even the birds had shut upâ€"for a few moments. When I gathered enough courage, I looked over the edge again.

It was massive and the color of the night skyâ€"its wings, though contained by the bola ropes, stretched high above its body, leathery sails for the heavens. I'd never seen another dragon with such huge wings.

Oh gods. A Night Fury.

Realizing that I was unarmedâ€"_Hiccup you useless idiot!_â€"I scrambled and grabbed the seaxe from my belt, holding it up and out with both hands.

Another minute to gather my courageâ€"and for me to realize that it wasn't breaking free, or looking for its tiny trapper with vengeance burning in its heartâ€"and I jumped down from the hill, hiding behind a boulder in case it woke up again.

When I looked back again, I saw that the head was turned away,

partially hidden by the angle. It didn't move. I don't think it _breathed_.

Great _ÃtsÃ-r_. That was a _Night Fury_.

I walked around from the boulder, eyes widening as I took in the entire thing, now that I was closer. It wasn't hugeâ€”not nearly the size of a Nightmareâ€”but it was sleek. It wasn't colorful like the other speciesâ€”even in the foggy light, the scales shone black and navy.

The head wasn't shaped like any of the other dragons' either, a rounded mouth easing into flaps of scale and skin angled against its neck, which didn't seem hard enough to be horns. My eyes kept sliding back to its wingsâ€”they were, again, massive. It was like a tent, and cast a shadow onto the ground that you could get lost in.

I could almost see the lean muscle under the skin. It had to be dead, because otherwise, I had a hard time believing just rope was keeping it down.

(Even if it _was_ reinforced with steel wire.)

"Oh wow. Iâ€”I did it." The dread from earlier vanished like black smoke into the night air, replacing itself with bubbling joy. "I did it! This, this fixes _everything_! Yes!" Pride grew from my heart and I stepped forward, aiming to put my foot on its shoulder in a heroic stance.

"I have brought down this mighty beasâ€”"

Uuuuwwurgh!

I jumped away, throwing my back against the rock as the shoulder shoved me off, a groan arising from its head.

Okay. Maybe _not_ so dead.

I could see its chest rising and falling now. It snuffed a blast of air through its nose. As I drew near, seaxe out and at the ready I could see it's eyelid open upâ€”the eye was enormous and poison-green, without a white. Only a parchment-thin, slitted pupil as black as its scales broke the toxic color.

Those eyes bothered me. They didn't look ferocious or mad. The pupil tightened and I could almost see something likeâ€”emotion in it, as it released a deep whine, like any other large, injured animal.

It was still alive. There was only one thing to do, then.

I took a deep breathâ€”severalâ€”and resettled my grip on the knife. The muscle in my chest twanged again, harder, but I paid it no attention. I turned to its chestâ€”its heart. I could almost see it beating underneath the scales, but I think I was imagining it. I just had to get the beating to stop.

My blade had to go inâ€”andâ€”and through the scales andâ€”

The dragon was staring at me, almost baleful. It lookedâ€”small. Wary. Like _I_ was the dangerous one, when I had a small blade and it

had fire and fangs and claws.

Those strange eyes watched me.

My arms wouldn't move. I pursed my lips and muttered under my breath. "I'm gonna kill you, dragon."

I forced myself to ignore its gaze, and the pain that kept growing in my chest with every word. I made myself face forward. At the chest, the pulsing heart. "I'm gonna cut out your heart and take it to my father."

Not sure who I was talking to—the dragon, or myself—I closed my eyes, believing that the darkness would afford me certainty, make it easier.

It breathed hard, but I kept my eyes shut. "I'm a Viking."

No response, from the dragon or my frozen arms. I screwed up my face. This was not the time to be Useless. It was time to prove myself. I was a Viking, I could kill this thing! I'd carve out its heart and take it to my father in the Great Hall! The tribe would cheer me and sing stories about this for generations! I'd be called the Useful, never Useless or Runt or Loki's Child again!

And those green eyes would never bother me again, because they'd be—

—frozen. Frozen in death, but still alone. Forever.

Loneliness—that was the emotion I saw in that toxic gaze. It was the same thing I'd been dreading when I thought I wouldn't find it.

The last thing I wanted was to live my life as a worthless hiccup. I did not want to die alone. By the looks of it, neither did this thing.

Were we really so different?

Yes we are! I reminded myself, scowling. I was a human being with honor, what little I had, and dignity! It wasn't, it didn't have any of that, it raided my village and killed members of my tribe! It was a bloodthirsty dragon and—

Except it wasn't bloodthirsty. Its eyes weren't ferocious—they were just alone, and they were something else, too.

They were scared.

(Maybe as scared as I was.)

No no no! I shook my head furiously. I can kill this dragon! I'm not soft! I'm not weak! I'm not Useless! I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III! I am the Hope and Heir to the Hooligans of Berk!

"And I am a VIKING!" I shouted, and I tore my eyes open to spit right into the dragon's face. "I am the grandson of **Thor himself**!"

It made a surprised sound, half a roar and half a whine. Its pupils seemed larger, and I could read pain in them along with the loneliness and fear“gods did I know pain and fear like that.

No!

I made myself close my eyes, and lifted the blade once more.

This is for everything I've ever been called, I made myself think. _Useless, scrawny, hiccup, weak. Mistake, curse, Loki's son, worthless. This is because they're _wrong_. _

I couldn't help but peek. Green eyes met green.

It looked like it was begging.

“|_He's so scared_**“|**_

No don't think that way! I screwed my eyes shut again and lifted my seaxe high. _It will die, they are wrong, they are wrong, they are _wrong“

The dragon's head hit the ground with a soft thump, a forlorn whine vibrating out of it. It gave up, resigned to a bloody fate at the end of the dagger I held.

Euuuummm

“|_This is _wrong_**.**_

"Fu(k."

I let the blade fall. The fleshy part of my palms hit my scalp.

I couldn't do it. I was weak, soft, worthless. Useless.

Letting it fall all the way to my side, I glanced down the length of the beast. The ropes were tight, obviously painful. They strained, but held as it breathed deeply. I'd done my job well, apparently. It didn't give me the pride I'd hoped it would.

Glancing at my seaxe, then back at the injured animal, I shook my head. "I did this," I muttered, looking at the defeated body in front of me. I started to walk away.

My chest twanged once more. I glanced back as the dragon took a heavy, crooning breath. It was still trapped“because of me, and it would not survive unless it was freed.

Soft, weak, Useless, cursed“|

"“|Might as well be crazy too," I muttered dryly, before sighing and hanging my head. I'd already decided to spare the thing“if I was going to dishonor Dad and my line today, I might as well do it right.

I turned back and set my seaxe to the rope. It was thick, good quality“traded for hard labor and meticulous craftsmanship, all to waste now“and took a minute to cut. The steel wire part of the braid took me an extra few seconds for every rope. Eventually, the

last of the three snapped with a quiet _shick_.

And then the creature slammed me onto my back against the boulder.

The soft croons were goneâ€”only the echoes of an angry screech and hot breaths on my face came from the dragon now. My heart raced and I looked up.

Two sharp eyes stared down at me with a scaly abyss between them. Anger and something almost like _logic_ swirling in the green depths. The pupils were even wider now, and I could see the individual strands of brown and gold that fell into the thin pit.

If it decided to blast me, I'd surviveâ€”lose all my limbs, but survive. Lips twitched, and I saw a flash of white fangs. I had no Gift to protect me from it biting through my skull.

But it didn't do that either.

Something deep in me shifted towards the dragon, and I eased out of my terrified spot against the rock. _Whyâ€|?_

It reared up. Wings went high, and I drew away. I heard gurglesâ€”fire coming, this was it, I had to cover my arms and legs at least for all the good it would doâ€”

Thor, please let me see my mom.

**OOOOEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHH**

No fire cameâ€”only a devastating _shriek_.

It hit me like a heated spear. Pain pierced sharp, and spread fast, rocketing and echoing through my skull. Suddenly free from its grasp, my arms came up to slap against my ears. But it did no good, the horrible screech was reverberating through my skull like an echo through a canyon, louder and louder and _louder_â€”

Curling up didn't help either. As the strength and volume grew, as I lost control and _screamed_, I felt something in my throat and between my ears shift.

Glass shattered in my mind, the sound grating and the shards piercing. Blistering heat seared from just behind my heart, and _burned_ at my insides. Agony assaulted me from every corner.

I screamed and screamed and screamed, until either the pain or the lack of air blacked me out.

* * *

><p>Not dying under that Night Fury's claw was the strangest experience of my life up to that pointâ€”but it was quickly beaten down by the experience of waking up after it happened.

The sun was almost down and casting a red glow through the trees when my eyes fluttered open. My head was swimming and I felt dizzyâ€”sitting up was a feat I wouldn't have been able to manage had

there not been a rock there for me to hold onto.

I winced and had to cradle my headâ€”something was _off_. About me, about the woodsâ€”it felt almost as if I were dreaming; no longer just a stand of trees, there was something _extra_ about the forest now. I couldn't place it.

The world seemed to shift and spin, and colors seemed sharper than normal as I tottered to my feet, planning on getting home before the sun really disappeared.

There was something red on the ground, I noticed. My hands travelled to my head, and found a half-dried stream of blood coming from both ears.

Either I hit my head, or that Fury did something to me. I wasn't sure which one to hope for.

The trip back home was longâ€”I didn't trust myself running at full speed likeâ€”thisâ€”but luckily, it seemed that every step settled me a little more. The weird sensation about the woods and colors faded. I was able to walk straight, after a while.

By the time I reached the house, the sun was down and the sky was darkening with twilight.

Maybe the Norns would smile on me, and Dad would be out doing chief thingsâ€”

I opened the door, looked inside, and mentally sworeâ€”of course not, why would I be that lucky? Hoping to sneak past him up to my room and the bed that was singing a siren's song, I closed the door quietly behind me and crept past him as he stoked the main fire.

I'd made it halfway up the stairs before, "Hiccup."

"Dad!" I said, stopping where I was. Remembering what happened earlier, what I'd doneâ€”or rather, didn't doâ€”I sighed and backed up on the stairs. "Iâ€”have to talk to you, Dad."

"I wish to speak with you too, son."

I nodded, took a breath, and said it: "I decided I don't want to fight dragons."

"What?" He'd said something too, right over me, and by the looks of it, neither of us had heard the other. "Uhâ€”you go first."

"No," I said, putting it off. He'd always said true Vikings were dragon killersâ€”avoiding the shame for as long as possible seemed like a good idea. "No, you go first."

"Alright." He looked at me, his brows low and eyes serious. "You get your wish. Dragon training. You start in the morning."

Dragon trainingâ€”the thing I'd been waiting for my whole life, offered when I'd just discovered I couldn't kill a Night Fury even if it was wrapped up with a pretty bola right in front of me. It was officialâ€”the gods really did hate me.

"Oh man, I should've gone first. Uh, cause I was thinkingâ€"you know, we have a surplus of dragon-fighting Vikings, but do we have enoughâ€" _bread-making_ Vikings, orâ€"or small home repair Vikings? I-I could work in the forge, I'm pretty good at thatâ€" "

"You'll need this." He lifted an axe that was sitting next to him and dumped it into my armsâ€"I nearly collapsed under the weight. It was a lot heavier than the seaxe I hadn't been able to use on the Night Fury.

"Uh, Dadâ€"I don't _want_ to fight dragons," I tried.

He laughed, turned around. "Oh, c'mon. Yes you do!"

I winced, knowing that everything I'd said and done over the last ten years was working against me. Maybe the only thing I could do was admit the truth. "Rephraseâ€" Dad, I _can't_ kill dragons."

"But you _will_ kill dragons!"

"No, I'm really very extra certain that I won'tâ€" "

"It's time, Hiccup," he said, his voice serious.

"Can you not hear me?" I begged.

"_This_, is _serious_, son." Apparently he _couldn't_ hear meâ€"or he thought I was joking, as he always did. He became quiet, the way he always did when he was trying to drill some kind of inspirational Viking concept into my brain. "When you carry this axe, you carry all of us with you. Which means you walk like us," he straightened my grip on the weapon, "you _talk_ like us," he lifted my shoulders so I was standing straight, "and you _think_ like us. No more ofâ€" this."

He must've been talking with Gobber. "You just gestured to _all_ of me," I pointed out, annoyed.

"Deal?"

What deal? What exactly were we agreeing on? That I'd be going into dragon training, and he'd beâ€" what? Standing in the background? He hadn't even listened to a word I'd said! "This conversation is feeling very one-sided!"

"_Deal?_"

I sighed and let the axe drop to the floor. There wasn't really anything else to say, except, "Deal."

"Good." I frowned as he picked up a large basket and threw the strap over his shoulder. Was he going somewhere? "Train hard. I'llâ€" "

"Waitâ€"where're you going?" I asked, taking a step forward as he picked his helmet from the spit.

"I'm heading a fleet to the Nest. We've got time for one more search before HÃ¶r closes the sea."

It wasn't exactly the first time he'd left to search for the Dragon's Nest, but for some reason, this time made my stomach clench. Dread mixed with fear in my gut, and I knew, somehow, that this wouldn't end well.

"Wait, Dad!" He turned around an eyebrow high. "I don't think you should go."

My dad frowned heavily. "Hiccup, these devils won't leave us alone—we need to find that Nest. If we take it down, they'll finally leave us be."

"Yeah, but—Dad, I really don't think you should go," I repeated, putting the axe to the side and walking forward, hands spread in the hope that he might actually listen this time. "Please, I—"

"Why not?"

"I don't know, I just—I have a feeling. Please Dad, call off the search."

He shook his head. "I can't call off a search just because you have a feeling, son."

"But it's not just any—"

He held up a hand the size of my chest. "That's my final word. It shouldn't take too long, so I'll be back. Probably."

I gaped at him, but he only left the house, the door closing with a soft click behind him. All I could do now, I guess, was pray that my feeling was wrong and that he'd manage to get back home.

I glanced over at the axe still on the floor. Dragon training started in the morning.

"I'll be here," I muttered, grunting as I picked it up with both hands. "Maybe."

* * *

><p>So yeah. Shorter, but I hope it's still good!
**

I tried to post this on Ao3, but I have literally 0 skill with HTML or Rich Text, and since I myself have a hard time reading anything that's not formatted well, I decided not to be a hypocrite and didn't post on there. However, it is on my Tumblr, URL author-of-the-unfinished and tagged "special gifts" and "sg".

Until tomorrow, my friends!

PEACE,

~Tibki

3. Chapter 3

Wheee, Chapter threeee!

****A great thank you to everyone who enjoyed the last two chapters,
and everyone who reviewed and followed!****

* *DISCLAIMED.* *

* * *

><p>CHAPTER THREE_

The next morning dawned grey and bleak—almost as grey and bleak as the stone that the Kill Ring was made of, and just as damp.

I wondered how my dad would react if I just ditched dragon training and went to, I don't know, throw myself off a cliff? I had a feeling it'd be less painful.

Besides knowing I had no choice and had agreed to last night's _'deal_', the only reason I picked up my axe and went to the Kill Ring that morning was because Gobber was teaching the class. Working as his apprentice for the last ten years gave me a good appreciation for how he worked, so at least I'd be able to guess what was in store. At least I'd have the small comfort of learning under him being _normal_ for me.

Had it been Uncle Spitelout or one of the Hoffersons teaching, I doubt I would've gotten out of bed.

I still arrived a little lateâ€"Gobber had already opened the gates and everyone else was inside. I caught the tail end of a conversation and winced.

"It's only fun if you get a scar out of it," Astrid was saying. Sometimes, I wondered why I liked her, or how this village had managed to survive 300 yearsâ€"that kind of thinking? Not exactly conducive to a long life.

"Yeah," I spoke up, walking down the ramp onto the Ring floor. "Pain. Love it!"

Tuffnut sneered. "Oh great. Who let him in?"

"Let's get started!" Gobber began, stepping forward. "The recrui' who does best will 'ave the honor of killing his first dragon in front of the _entire_ village!"

He stabbed his hook forward and twisted it as he said the words. Imagining that hook piercing black scales, I almost felt sick, even despite the fact that it was a dragon. We were supposed to kill them, which was why what I did yesterday was so stupid.

Thank the gods I was not going to be winning, then. I'd probably end up freeing the thingâ€” again .

"Hiccup already killed a Night Fury," Snotlout pointed out, and the reminder made me flinch. "So, does that disqualify him orâ€|?" Ruffnut and Tuffnut cracked up. "Can I transfer to the class with the cool Vikings?" he continued as they turned away and waked further into the Ring.

Gobber stepped up and started walking me to the line the others were forming. "Don' worry. Ye're small, and weak." Yes, thank you for the reminder. "That'll make ye less of a targe'! They'll think ye're sick or insane, and go after the more Viking-like teens instead."

(That was his way of trying to cheer me up. I forced myself to appreciate the thought even if the execution was a little iffy.)

He crossed in front of the line. "These are just a few of the species you will learn to fight! The Deadly Nadder," he said as he passed by a door that rumbled andâ€| cawed?

Fishlegs, next to me, muttered under his breath, "Speed 8, armor 16." I looked at him oddly, but he didn't seem to notice.

"The Hideous Zippleback!" Gobber pointed to a set of double doors.

"Plus 11 stealth, times 2â€|"

"The Monstrous Nightmare."

"Fire power 15."

"The Terrible Terror!"

"Attack 8, venom 12!"

"Can you stop that?!" Gobber yelled, giving him an annoyed look and rolling his eyes. He stopped by a lever next to a circular door. "_And_", he continued, "the Gronkle."

Fishlegs leaned over and whispered to me, "Jaw strength 8." I looked to him, confused at what he said and surprised that he was talking to me.

Gobber put his hand on the lever, and Snotlout freaked. "Wait, wait, whoa! Aren't you gonna teach us first?"

Yeah, right. The blacksmith grinned, something I'd always seen as evil. "That's not how Gobber teaches," I muttered to Fishlegs, lifting the axe in front of me. The other boy blinked in surprise and a bit of worry.

"I believe in learning on the job," he said, and he opened the cell.

The dragon burst out of its cage, snarling like a hound and flying directly towards us. It was vomit-green and brown, a little shorter than me and just as wideâ€|almost perfectly bulbous, with a similarly shaped tail. It had relatively skimpy little wings that flapped like a hummingbird's.

The entire group cut and run, several of us screaming. Myself included. "Today!" Gobber shouted over the chaos, "is about survival! If ye're blasted, ye're dead!"

The Gronkle slammed into the opposite wall, probably dazed from its sudden release. I got up quickly and snatched up a few rocks that were next to it, crunching and swallowing them.

"Quick, what's the first thing you need?" Gobber shouted.

"A doctor?" I suggested. Sometimes I really hated the way he taught.

"Plus 5 speed?"

"A shield!" Astrid replied. She sounded ready and determined, and I could see her standing in a fighting stance, eyes narrowed at the dragon in front of us.

"Shield, go!"

We scattered, running to the shields strewn around the Ring floor. I found a red one and picked it up, trying to find the strapâ€"I was used to fixing these things, not using them.

"Your most important piece of equipment is your shield!" Gobber walked up and thrust it onto my arm, then tossed me back into the fray. "If ye have to make a choice between a sword and a shield, take the shield!"

The Gronkle was chasing Fishlegs in circles around the Ring, so I managed to get out of its way. I could hear the twins arguing over a shield a little way awayâ€"they really didn't know that there was a time and place, and that this was not it.

They paid for it, though, when the dragon lost interest in Fishlegs and turned to them, using a shot of fire to blast the shield they were both tugging on.

"Tuffnut, Ruffnut, ye're out!" Gobber yelled, and I could've sworn I saw a smirk on his face, just for a moment. Of course this is fun for him. "Those shields are good for another thingâ€"noise. Make lots of it to throw off a dragon's aim!"

That much I could manage. I banged my axe against the shield, and with all four of us doing it, the dragon started wobbling in the air, its eyes looking confused. There was general movement, scrambling and swearing as we tried to avoid the angry beast and make as much noise as possible in the process.

I saw that the other guys were moving into a formationâ€"a battle tactic, and obviously a familiar one to them. Maybe it was a consequence of them all being on the fire brigade, but they'd moved as one now, in practiced maneuversâ€"Fishlegs in the back for sheer force, Snotlout aggressive in front. When one of them was in danger, the other covered him.

They stepped forward and helped surround the dragon quickly, banging and clattering on their shields and making it even more confused.

I noticed that their formation had a hole in it, even besides the spaces for the called-out twins, who were whooping in the stands. There was a big patch of empty, up by its head, near Snotlout, but away from Astrid. Like me, she was standing on her own, except she was probably doing it by choice.

Figuring it was better to be in the front as a group than stand alone

as a target, I tried to jump in to the empty spot"and immediately got socked in the face by my oh-so-loving cousin.

Snotlout snarled at me. "That's Astrid's place, Useless!" he said. It was a miracle that I could get onto my feet before the dragon noticed I was down and an easy shot.

Apparently, Gobber hadn't heard the conversation. "All dragons 'ave a limited number of shots! How many does the Gronkle 'ave?"

"Five?" Snotlout guessed, glancing up. I was too busy banging my shield and rubbing my chin to guess, myself.

"No, six!" Fishlegs yelled, stopping where he stood. At least his dragon knowledge was good for something, then. Except the circle, having been broken when he'd stopped, split apart, and the Gronkle shook any daze we'd given it off. I ducked behind a wooden board for cover, because this was about to get ugly.

"Correct, six!" Fishlegs beamed and raised his shield, which was immediately destroyed by a mouthful of lava, courtesy of the Gronkle. "Tha's one fer each of ye! Fishlegs, out!"

The larger boy screamed and booked it. "Hiccup!" Gobber shouted. "Get in there!"

I poked out of the cover, and yelped as another shot blasted into the wall beside me. It had been inches from my arm, and I ducked back behind the wall.

The only ones left out on the floor were me, Astrid, and Snotlout. I heard him start talking to her and felt pure incredulity at him"maybe I didn't know much about being a Viking, but violent or not, the Kill Ring wasn't exactly a place for flirting, was it?

I jumped out from my spot just as Astrid leapt gracefully out of the way, letting the Gronkle blast Snotlout's shield. "Snotlout, ye're done!"

Astrid was crouched in front of me, her eyes narrowed towards the beast. "I guess it's just you and me, huh?"

"Nope, just you!" she answered before running out of the way.

The fireball she'd just dodged slammed into my shield, ripping it off my arm and sending it to shatter against a wall. I scrambled to my feet, glancing around for another shield"there, rolling across the floor!

"One shot left!" Gobber called as I chased after it.

I heard wings behind me and realized that it was coming after me"suddenly terrified, I abandoned the shield and ran, not realizing until it was too late that there was only wall in front of me"no way out.

"Hiccup!" Gobber yelled, fear in his voice.

I fell against the wall and spun around"oh gods, it was right in my

face! I could feel its breath, reeking of fish, blowing up my hair, and its teeth were inches long and sharper than anything I'd ever seen.

It opened its mouth, and I saw a growing light in the back of its throat. Oh OÃ°in, it was going to blow my secretâ€”and my limbs to pieces.

I _screamed_, the intensity of my need for the secret to stay secret _ripping_ _pain_ through my throat.

The Gronkle froze, just for a moment. Then it snarled and opened its mouth again.

A hook shot out from my left, catching the inside of its gums. The Gronkle released the fireball and I ducked, hoping to avoid as much of the burning fire and glowing ash as possible.

I felt the flames, gentle on my head and thankfully far enough away to that it didn't badly burn my arms.

There was a gasp from the other side of the Ring. I heard Snotlout swear, the twins shout _"Awesome!"_ and Fishlegs scream. _\$hit, did they see?_

Gobber, knowing that even if it had hit me I wasn't dead, wasn't too concerned. He dragged the Gronkle away by the jaw, barely struggling. "An' tha's six!" he said before throwing it back into its cage. "Go back to bed, ye overgrown sausage!"

I scrambled to my feet as he wrangled it into the cell. "Aw, he's alive!" Tuffnut called out, sounding a little put out.

"How in OÃ°in's great name are you still breathing?" Fishlegs shrieked, and I could see his knuckles were white on his hammer.

\$hit, they did see. I glanced back to Gobber, who was no help. "Uhâ€”it missed," I explained. "Obviously, I mean. H-how _else_ would I have survived that?"

Astrid glanced over me. "You must have Loki's luck, then. It looked like you were done."

"_Well_-done," Fishlegs agreed. I shrugged, not comfortable with a subject so close to my secret.

Gobber, now done with the Gronkle, spoke up. "Ye'll get another chance, don't you worry. Las' lesson fer the dayâ€”ye migh' jus' be in trainin', but to a dragon, there is no trainin'. It don't mat'er whether it's in 'ere or out in the villageâ€”a dragon will always," he turned and looked at me sharplyâ€”he never liked it when I came close to dying, "_always_. Go for the _kill_."

I blinked up at him, knowing it was concern showing through his anger, but regardless, the words stuck in my mind.

* * *

><p>Training was dismissed then, but I didn't go back to the house or

the forgeâ€”instead I broke away from the others, not that they cared where I went, and walked into the forest. The moment I was out of sight of the village, I pulled off my boots, tied them to my belt, and took off.<p>

I always thought best when running. Seeing the world zip past me faster than a falcon could dive, or a horse could run, was calming in a wayâ€”it erased the worries and concerns and the shame of my life in Berk. When I was running, I wasn't Hiccup the Useless or "Loki's Son" (and no, the irony of that never failed to stab). I wasn't the destroyer of the village and an embarrassment to my family and tribeâ€”I was just Hiccup, a kid who liked running and did it well. Releasing the humiliation and worries that Berk was filled with allowed me to get my thoughts in order.

Number one on that list was what Gobber had said. _Dragons will always go for the kill._ What I'd seen over my entire life, during the dragon raids and whenever the lone surviving ship of an entire fleet limped back from a search through Helheim's Gate, supported that idea. That dragons were ruthless beasts, happy to gut me immediately and chew on my intestines like a nice, tender piece of mutton.

Also, it was _Gobber_ who'd said itâ€”the man who'd taught me everything I knew about metallurgy, about the forge and the fire. He'd been a dragon hunter for more than twice the time I'd been aliveâ€”since he was a few years older than my father, he'd been killing dragons even longer than the Chief. He was the resident expert on dragonsâ€”that was why he was training us. That was why he was practically second-in-command despite the fact that he's not closely related to the Haddock's and might be a little bit insane.

If there was any judgment I should immediately and unquestioningly trust about dragons, it should be Gobber's. At any other point in my life, I would've taken his word without a single thought.

The last two days threw a wrench into all that.

The Night Fury _hadn't_ killed me, and it had definitely had the chance. Gobber had said that they would end our lives without hesitation, but I'd very clearly seen that Gronkle freeze, for a moment.

Gobber was the best person to listen to on Berk when it came to dragons, but two separate dragons had done the opposite of what he'd said.

Why had the Gronkle hesitated? I wasn't like I was posing a threat to itâ€”there was no reason for it to freeze like it had. And the Night Furyâ€”|

I turned sharply, kicking up moss and dirt in a wide arc. Starting from the other side of the island, it took me only a few seconds to get to the damaged earth and destroyed trees that evidenced the spot where the Fury had fallen.

With a grace I only ever possessed at high speed, I zipped over the hill and leapt down next to the boulder. The bolas were still thereâ€”the carefully cut rocks and the sliced ropes. I knelt and picked one of the weights up, holding the rope in my other hand

thoughtfully.

Gobber said dragons would always kill. "So why didn't you?" I muttered, half confused and very curious.

Standing, I jumped over a log in front of me before jogging deeper into the forest. Not really sure where I was going, just following some sense between my ears, I walked through the trees and over a few hills.

I reached two immense boulders with a fallen branch caught between them and froze—"there was something on the other side, I could see a glimmer of sunlight on water.

Carefully, I picked my way through the tiny space between the boulders and stopped on their other side.

It was a cove of some kind that had been closed off by a landslide—the boulders I'd walked through were just the tip of the iceberg. Life had flourished inside the massive, closed bowl; lush green grew on every surface, drawing in the soft light of the afternoon sun. A few ancient trees grew just on top of the walls, their massive roots reaching the floor of the hole and then sinking deep into the earth. Birds took off from a sapling, and I could hear the splash of fish in the small lake.

Other than that, the place was abandoned.

"Well this was stupid." What exactly had I been expecting, for the Fury to be hanging around here because it liked the view? It could fly—it was probably miles away at this point. And besides, it wasn't like I'd actually be able to find out why it hadn't tried to kill me—It'd probably just try and finish what it almost started.

All the same, though, I couldn't bring myself to leave. I looked around for something to distract me, and caught sight of something shiny and black on the ground next to me.

I stooped and picked it up, curious. It was a scale—next to more of them, and a few discs hardened from drops of dark, dried blood, dull yellow in color and as smooth and tough as metal.

So it had been—

RRRrrrrrrraaa!

The sudden and unbelievably fast streak of black knocked me over onto the dirt, and when I jumped up to look, there was the Night Fury, flapping and clawing desperately at the wall above me. It fell some height, and snapped its wings out to glide across the lake and land safely.

Not had been—is here!

Feeling strangely excited and not at all scared, I leapt off the ledge to a small, but closer, outcropping of rock, for a better view.

The Fury took off once more, the wide black wings sweeping through

the air, and at that moment, I couldn't imagine anything more graceful.

Up until the point that it's tail twisted under it's body, and it fell with a heavy thump and an almost grieving wail. It tried a vertical takeoff, then, but didn't make it higher than halfway up the wall, the wings bending desperately for more altitude.

I really couldn't not draw itâ€"not only was this the greatest opportunity any Viking had probably ever been afforded, to draw a Night Fury, the dragon looked, well, pretty darn cool. I had to get it down.

The shape of the head and the wings I remembered from yesterday, so there was no trouble in it moving too much or too fast. When it straightened out after another failed attemptâ€"and what looked like an annoyed blast of fireâ€"it spread itself out enough for me to get everything else.

There was a secondary pair of wings, just under the big onesâ€"they were closing now, but I'd seen them open whenever it glided back down over me after trying to escape. There was also a third set, fins on the tail. It was low to the ground and thin, sleek and slippery, almost like a salamander. Small spikes made a line down its back, and there were horns on the bony ends of the bat-like main wings.

Drawing done, I sat back and frowned, remembering my earlier thought. "Why don't you justâ€¦ fly away?"

After a closer look, I saw itâ€"the left tail fin was missing. I erased it from my notebook, thinking hard. Though I only knew a little about dragons, as the son of a Chief, Dad had taught me as much about ships as he could before he realized I couldn't swim (another, less cool, Gift from my grandfather).

Ships needed to be symmetrical across a line down the middle, running from the stempost to the sternpost. Vikings were excellent at building perfectly shaped shipsâ€"that's why my cousins further south, who had much more food and fewer dragon problems, were such great raiders.

Maybe air wasn't the same as water, but I could bet that dragons needed to be symmetrical too, for flight to be possibleâ€"quickly running through the dragons I knew of, I couldn't think of one that wasn't like that.

So when its tailfin was ripped off, I realized, it got grounded. I wonder howâ€" _

Another heavy crash woke me from my thoughts. The dragon, looking forlorn, had (landed isn't exactly the right wordâ€¦) hit earth by the lake. It must've heard the fish too, because suddenly, all of its attention was on the water.

It's head shot into the lake, but came back up empty. A pang of sympathy and memory went through my gutâ€"when Dad had gone on searches and the raids, before I'd learned to cook for myself, I'd felt the pains of hunger too.

Unconsciously, I let my left arm relaxâ€”and the charcoal I'd been drawing with slipped from my grip, falling off the ledge.

I yelped and reached, but too late; not only was it on the floor of the cove, but the dragon had heard me.

It looked up, and I froze, ready to run.

Something kept me stuck there, thoughâ€”I don't know if I was frozen in fear or if I'd read something in its eyes, which just _barely_ didn't narrow on sight of me.

The seconds where it didn't attack melted my anxiety and sparked curiosity. I tilted my head towards itâ€”and, the same wonder and interest in his eyes, the dragon tilted his head right back.

The sparse cloud that had been blocking out the sun moved, and a shaft of light dropped into the cove. The strange, curious moment was shattered when the dragon _screeched_.

Weirdly, it didn't hurt me the same way the Night Fury screams usually didâ€”but it still made me wince and grab my head, ducking away.

Why had itâ€”|?

Frowning, I looked up, and stared at the sight below me. On the floor of the cove, now washed with bright sunlight, the black dragon was shrieking in what sounded and looked like _pain_. The poor creature was writhing on the dirt, paws scrambling at the long flaps coming off its head.

It stood, trembling, and shook its head furiously. When it opened its eyes, I could see the pupils, even from all the way from where I wasâ€”they were expanding and shrinking crazily, making it look like a demon at one extreme and, well, a dragon on the other.

The dragon yowledâ€”my ears rang, but again, not the same sheer pain like beforeâ€”and ran for the stone edge of the cove. I tensed, thinking it would try and fly out, to try to reach and attack me, but it didn't.

The creature rammed its head directly into the wall.

I hissed at the way it slumped backâ€”_gods_ that had to have hurt. It seemed dazed for a moment, and I wasn't surprised.

The dragon opened its crazy eyes again, glancing up at the sky. It flinched and I saw its entire body tremble as it collapsed.

Stunned, I crouched forward, watching as it huddled down and tried to cover its head with a wingâ€”only for that wing to start shaking too. Looking close, I could see something that resembled _steam_ coming off its scales.

The sun's hurting it, I realized. _Maybe that's part of the reason why it only comes out at nightâ€”|_

But then why didn't it have a problem earlier?

I was trapped staring at it, amazed and curious, until it screamed again. But this scream was differentâ€”this wasn't one of surprise or pain. It was begging for mercy.

The dragon howled, plaintive and agonized, and I found myself moving before I even thought about it.

Scrambling up to the edge of the cove, I grabbed the first huge fern I could find and cut it down with my seaxe. I re-sheathed the blade and stripped off my vest, heart pumping hard and fast at the cries echoing in the bowl of the cove.

The vest went on top of the fern, and I ran back to the edge of the cove. Moving until the dragon was right below me, I huffed in effortâ€”the plant was big and heavyâ€”and held the vest-covered fern out.

If I'd held the vest up in front of the dragon's face, maybe it would've covered its eyesâ€”but at this height, with the angle of the sun where it was, the shadow would cover the entire body.

The screams stopped immediately, gurgling as the last one was swallowed. I heard heavy breathing, but couldn't afford to look downâ€”it was taking most of my strength to hold the thing up.

"B-better?" I found myself asking, my voice straining. The moment the word was out, my face fell. Useless, cursed, runt, and now, crazy. Definitely crazy. I was talking to a dragon.

But thenâ€”then a rumbling moan came from below. Not a growl or a snarl. Just aâ€” sound. A warble.

I still couldn't afford to look down, but luckily another cloud came to block out the sun. The moment it did, I figured it safe and groaned, dropping the fern in relief.

â€”Except the fern drooped, and my vest slid right off.

"Oh noâ€”ah, Hel take it!" I swore, diving but never having a chance.

The fur vestâ€”hard won from a massive bear felled by my dad's handsâ€”dropped into the cove. A yelp came up from underneath and I cringed.

Slowly, I crawled forward and peeked over the edge. The dragon was sitting up straight, and had my vest draped over its face. I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

Uuurrrrrr

The sound made me freeze, and I glanced back down nervously. The dragon had shaken the vest off and was watching me with narrowed eyes.

And then I solidified my insanity by chuckling againâ€”at a semi-pissed dragon.

The dragon huffed, and just before it stalked off, I swear to OÃ°in

it _rolled its eyes_.

(That was, by the way, the first eye-roll of _hundreds_ I'd get from that sassy reptile.)

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it! As Hiccup would say, "S-see you tomorrow!"
**

PEACE,

~Tibki

4. Chapter 4

Hey y'all! Ever seen _The Sorcerer's Apprentice (2010)_ with Jay Baruchel as David Stutler?

**It's really a miracle [this story got updated] tonight. This [profile] might not matter, but the****story_ does._**

**My computer has been asking for an update for the past like, eight weeks, but I always refused it until last night... and once Max (my Mac... yeah, I'm not super imaginative when it comes to names) restarted, the wifi refused to work. It connected. I had the password right. It just didn't work. I wouldn't even be on here if I hadn't the inspiration from God to reboot the modem. **

But, it's up now!

Many many thanks to those lovelies who reviewed and/or followed and/or favorited! You're all my favorite people _ever._

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FOUR_

It wasn't until the sun had set that I got back to the villageâ€"after leaving the dragon, I'd spent the rest of the day running, trying to sort out my thoughts and failing pretty badly.

I didn't come out of my thinking until it started rainingâ€"then I glanced up at the sky, saw what time it was, and ran back to Berk. The trainees were supposed to have dinner together with Gobber in the Great Hall, in an effort to solidify friendships and let the passing of the axe of the old to the new generations go smoothly.

(The passing of the axe part made it a good idea; the 'friendships' part is to blame for the holes in the walls of the Hall that didn't already have my name on them.)

The great fires were already lit when I arrived, and I was soaked to the bone, freezing without my vest. My shoes were _disgusting_ to put on wet, but, used to this, I grit my teeth and shoved both my feet into the soggy boots.

When I got inside, I saw the others had started without me. Of course, why would they wait for _Hiccup_?

"Where did Astrid go wrong in the Ring today?" I caught Gobber asking the group.

Nowhere, as usual, in my opinion. She was going to kill that dragon at the end of training, no question about it. Astrid, though, was a little harsher on herself. "I mistimed my somersault dive. It was sloppy, it threw off my reverse tumble."

"Yeah, we _noticed_," Ruffnut said maliciously.

"No, no!" Snotlout cut in, and to my ears, he sounded sleazy and desperate—"typical Snotlout, then. (Yes, I did _very much_ adore my cousin.) "You looked _great_, that was so _Astrid_."

"She's right!" Gobber claimed. "Ye have to be tough on yerselves."

I came up to the table they were sharing and picked up a plate with a leg of chicken and a cup of water. Snotlout turned and put his hand on the empty seat on the bench—"no welcome there. Not that I was expecting one.

"Where did Hiccup go wrong?"

Oh _gods_ Gobber must hate me. Why else would he do this?

The others took the bait like starved fish. "Uh, he _showed up_?" Ruffnut suggested.

"He didn't get eaten!" Tuffnut added.

"He's _never_ where he _should be_," Astrid pointed out. That one, in that voice—"never heard saying a word against me, even now this was probably her idea of _helping_—"made me wince.

"_Thank you_, Astrid."

Ignoring them all, I walked past the trainee table and sat at an empty one beside it. Gobber walked between the tables, including me as he always tried. "You need to live an' _breathe_ this stuff. Th' Dragon Manual!"

He swept some plates and cups off the table and tossed the book into their place. "Everything we know about every dragon we know of." I looked up—"that sounded interesting. Maybe there was something in there about Night Furies?

Thunder rumbled outside and made the lanterns and torches shake. I wondered if good ol' Grandpa was finally getting fed up with Ruffnut and Tuffnut's constant threats to eviscerate his only descendant.

Gobber glanced to me and I shrugged helplessly. "No attacks tonight," he said, turning to leave. "Study up."

The smith wasn't even all the way out the door before Tuffnut protested. "Wait—"you mean _read_?"

"While we're still alive?" Ruffnut added incredulously.

(I wasn't too surprised that they didn't want to do it; it went against everything they stood for, and if they knew how to read, I'm a three-legged Zippleback.)

Snotlout, though I was certain of his literacy (it wasn't much, but he was second-in-line for the chieftaincyâ€"reports had to be read somehow), spoke up too, slamming his hand against the table. "Why read words when you can just go kill the stuff the words tell you stuff about?"

(The only heirs to Berk are scrawny old me and this guy. You can see why everyone, including my dad, is concerned.)

"Oh!" Fishlegs said eagerly, earning strange looks from the entire group. "I've read it like, seven times! There's this water dragon that sprays boiling water at your face! And there's this other oneâ€"!"

"Yeah! That sounds great," Tuffnut cut in, making a closing motion with his hands. "There was a chance I was going to read thatâ€"!"

"But, nowâ€"!" his twin finished.

Snotlout stood, pushing his bench back. "You guys read, I'll go kill stuff." Gods help any poor animal stupid enough to be out in this rain thenâ€"and gods help them for not realizing everything would be taking cover in a thunderstorm like this. Ruffnut and Tuffnut followed him quickly, alongside Fishlegs, who was still reciting different dragon species. Had I not wanted to risk a beat down courtesy of his friends, and had there not been a better source right in front of me, I would've asked him about Night Furies.

I got up and walked over to the tableâ€"only Astrid was left. "So, I guess we'llâ€" share?" I offered.

Astrid used a finger to push the book towards me. "Read it," she said.

"O-oh. All mine then. Wow." And because I was, for some reason, feeling bold: "Unless you, uhâ€"wanna go over it together?"

Her eyebrow rose like a thin drawbridge. "We're not friends."

My face turned bright red, I could feel it. "Uhâ€"of course not! No, not at all, why would we be friends, you know? In fact, we, we are like, anti-friends!"

The eyebrow cranked higher as I died inside. She sighed, shook her head, and left me to my humiliation.

Though I knew that it wouldn't look too oddâ€"for a dragon-killing trainee to be reading the Manual, or for the just weird, un-physical son of the Chief to be reading, of all the terrible hobbiesâ€"I waited until the Great Hall was empty until going to the book. I'm not sure why; I could've wanted to put it off for some reason, dreading the information I'd get, or maybe I didn't want to be seen

looking up Night Furies so soon after "downing" one.

I spent the few hours between dinner and the complete abandonment of the Hall sitting away from the main fire and inspecting the bruises and little wounds training had left me this morning. Over the years, I'd scraped together a good collection of remedies from one of the brusque and ironically violent village Healers, mixed with what I could get out of Grandmother Gothi's wordlessness. But the ingredients and everything were all back at the house and no good to me unless I went back home—but if I left the Manual alone, I had a feeling it would walk off with a pair of legs named after Fish.

It hadn't been as bad as I expected; especially considering, if I'd been anyone else, I'd've been dead from that last Gronkle blast to the face. Only most of my back felt bruised, and the hair was burnt off my forearms—but both things I was very accustomed to as, A, a blacksmith apprentice, and B, a blacksmith apprentice to Gobber.

When the Hall was empty, I stood up and walked to the central fireplace, the flames growing higher and hotter as I got closer. A pair of candles on plates I'd gotten from one of the back tables lit a few inches from the actual fire, and it was hard work for me to actually put the entire pit out.

Once it was, my candles were the only light in the entire hall, bright and warm with my proximity. I carried it back to the trainee table and sat down in front of the book.

It was red leather—but second most difficult to produce after white leather, showing how important it was to the tribe—but and embossed with a circular, spiraled dragon curled up on the front. The book was longer than my forearm and not easy to open.

The first page had dragon classifications—but Stoker, Strike, Fear, Boulder, Sharp, Tidal, Mystery classes. Not a table of contents; organization wasn't a Viking's strongpoint. We were more likely to just toss every newly discovered dragon in at the back. I turned to the next page.

"Thunderdrum," I read out loud. The pictures with its mouth closed had it squat and wide, with an overlapping lower jaw whose long fangs stuck out almost to the eye. When its mouth, which seemed to take up most of the front part of its body, was open, it would suddenly become twice as wide as it had been before, shaped like a cylinder, and you could see the multiple rings of teeth. "This reclusive dragon inhabits sea caves and dark tide pools. When startled, the Thunderdrum produces a concussive sound that can kill a man at close range."

(I figured that the picture was an exaggeration. The victim's head wouldn't really be blown off its body—but or at least, I sincerely prayed so.)

"Extremely dangerous, kill on sight," was the last thing the two pages on the species said. If it did blow people's heads off, I could understand why.

I flipped a few pages and stopped randomly—but "Timberjack." This guy had a long neck and head, like a Nightmare's, but that's where the

similarities ended. Its body was more worm-shaped, and its wings were huge and had hooks on the tips. "This gigantic creature has razor-sharp wings that can slice through full-grown trees. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight."

(I had to wonder why they threatened Vikings, if they were just happy cutting a bunch of trees down.)

"Scauldron," was the next random pick. It had a super long, thin neck that ended, on one side, in a thin head and a huge baggy pouch under it. On the other, there was an almost grotesquely bloated body. The tail fin was nothing like the Night Fury's, more a fan or a fish's fin—the top said it was a Tidal class. "Sprays scalding water at its victim. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight."

(That one was a bit more understandable; Vikings are sea-faring folk, and running into sea dragons was an occupational hazard. A lot of ships searching for the Nest had come limping back, never even having reached Helheim's Gate because of things like this.)

"Changewing" a strangely shaped head with vines growing off of its neck—"Even newly hatched dragons can spray acid. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight."

There was the Gronkle from this morning, and the Zippleback; the Skrill and the Bone Knapper; Deadly Nadder and the Nightmare; Terrible Terrors and the Flightmare.

Gods, there were so many, and they all had different ways of killing people—burning, eating, boiling, burying, choking, ripping, driving them mad, turning them inside out—good in let me never meet that thing, and it was ugly too.

Across the entire book, from Tidal to Stoker class, there was only one thing kept the same: the images of Vikings taking axes and swords and spears and everything on hand to the dragons, blood spurting in colorless waves across the pages.

Extremely dangerous, kill on sight. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight. EXTREMELY DANGEROUS KILL ON SIGHT.

A BOOM of thunder scared me out of my reading, and I glanced back at the half-open Hall doors in time to see the lightning fade.

I swallowed, still feeling my stomach twist with the images of dragon and Vikingly gore. What could that mean?

When I turned back to the book, I saw that jumping at the sound had thrown me onto the last page—one almost completely empty.

"Night Fury," I read, my voice soft and a little awed. There was so much blank space. "Speed, unknown. Size, unknown. The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Never engage this dragon. Your only chance: hide and pray it does not find you."

There was nothing here. We didn't know anything about it, could only hide from it. And because of that, it came off as the most terrifying creature in Midgard, and I remembered thinking the same of it not too long ago.

But none of that matched the dragon I'd seen this afternoon after training. It was down, but the look it gave me hours ago hadn't been vicious, or ferocious, or wild, or bringing down the wrath of the gods of lightning and death—it had been curious, maybe somewhat annoyed. Definitely annoyed, after I hit it with my vest.

(After fifteen years of it coming from every direction, I was able to read annoyance off any face, no matter the species and no matter how much they tried to hide it. It's a gift.)

The Manual obviously knew nothing about the thing—the enormous spread of blank said as much as bolded letters did—but what it lacked was so much worse than the fact that it did lack.

The dragon trapped in the cove had seemed aware. Not like the aggressive, raiding dragons were. I remembered how long it had taken me to realize it had only gone after the catapults, never going after food; now knowing about its relatively small size and vulnerable, large-target wings, it made a lot of sense for it to stay away from the main fight, but going after the catapults especially?

That was strategy. That was a thought process, protecting its companions and not making itself a target, maybe so that it could keep protecting them. That was intelligence. The Manual had nothing about that. Nobody had anything about that.

(I had to wonder how much of that intelligence was in other dragons; the raids said not much.)

I fished my notebook out of my jacket and flipped it open to my drawing of the Night Fury, dropping it on the Manual. None of the other dragons I'd flipped through had matched; this was the Night Fury, all right.

I pulled out my charcoal and put it onto the empty Manual page, transferring my sketch of the dragon onto the space before moving down to add notes.

This dragon's wingspan has to be almost 50 feet, I wrote, tongue between my teeth and trying to bring up every memory of the dragon I had. Small and sleek, its pitch-black color lets it blend smoothly in with the night sky—hence the name. The scales also seem to be vulnerable to sunlight, which is probably why no one has seen the thing during the day before.

It only goes after catapults during raids. I licked my lips, thoughtful. Intelligent. Self-aware and forward-thinking—wingspan ignored, it's one of the smallest dragons out there so it would be easy to take down, and it knows that, so it relies on stealth and carefully chosen, strategic targets.

Needs both tailfins to fly.

* * *

><p>The next morning, for dragon training, Gobber had set up the wall constructs he usually kept housed under a small roof behind the forge—saved especially for two purposes: a, dragon training, and b, emergency.<p>

("Emergency" usually meant "Hiccup blew something up and we need something to patch up the hole until we can get to fixing it.")

I actually wasn't even aware of their primary purpose, so when I walked into the Ring with my axe and shield and saw them standing everywhere, my first and automatic reaction was to wave my arms and say, "But it wasn't even me this time!"

The other trainees snickered or glared at me, but when Gobber's laughs echoed through the Ring, it came from above. We all turned our heads upwards and saw him leaning against the bars of the cage—before the chain roof began, and immediately above the chiseled-out stone walls, there were horizontal iron bars running around the place to keep spectators safe. They were spread far apart, so people had been known to get wounded just from watching a Kill, and kids were banned from the Ring at all after one had fallen in and nearly gotten swallowed.

I gulped—"Gobber was staying out of this one? That wasn't good.

"Uh—| is that bad?"

When no one answered Fishlegs, I realized he was talking to me. The others were looking at him oddly, but I met his gaze and sighed. "If he's not down here with us," I said, weary already, "then whatever today's lesson is? It's only half for our education. The other half is for his—| own entertainment. He used to sit back and watch as I struggled to make nails when I was a kid."

Fishlegs seemed to take my warning to heart and looked worried, but Snotlout snorted. "Wow, you were just as Useless as a kid as you are now! How hard could nails be?"

"Not as hard as your head," I muttered, insulted, and thank OÃ°in I wasn't heard.

"You're Gobber's apprentice," Astrid seemed to suddenly realize. I wasn't too surprised that she didn't know before now—as conspicuous as my—| explosive escapades could be, something as scrawny as I am among a tribe full of such enormous people, was bound to get overlooked. "You know how he tea—"

"Good morning!" Apparently Gobber was ready to get his amusement for the day. "Aan'—| good nigh'!"

He pulled a lever next to him, and our heads snapped to the maze of walls as something clanged on the other side. A quick rattling and heavy stepping suddenly filled our ears, and we almost subconsciously huddled closer.

I wasn't the only one to pale this time—"Fishlegs was white too. The others, predictably, looked excited.

"'Oo wants to guess which dragon I just released?"

Doubtful that it was the Gronkle—"Gobber wouldn't want to repeat yesterday's close call to my secret. I frowned, trying to guess with the sound, and Fishlegs spoke up. "It's the Nadder!" he

squeaked.

"Good!" The rattling and footsteps stopped, then started againâ€"faster and getting louder! "Ye migh' want ta run now that it's 'eard where ya are!"

We scattered, screaming. I could hear Gobber laughing above us.

I cut through part of the mazeâ€"losing my sense of direction almost immediatelyâ€"and stopped when I saw that I was underneath Gobber. Well, there might not be a better timeâ€|

"Hey Gobber?" I asked, stopping. "I noticed that there was nothing in the book about Night Furies. Is there another book, maybe a Night Fury pamphlet?"

It had been bugging me all day; that couldn't be all that anyone really knew about the thing! There was nothing there!

He didn't even answer before a blast of impossibly hot fire burned past my left arm, melting the head of my axe away into nothing, and leaving an enormous hole in the wall. The thing was right in front of meâ€"blue and birdlike and decorated with yellow spines. I didn't care about anything right now, though, except the fact that its fire burned hotter than any other.

(Twice as hot with me around. They really should've thought through having me in dragon training.)

I yelped and ran, nearly tripping in both directions before picking one and taking it. "Focus, Hiccup!" Gobber shouted as I tried to decide if it was worth my life to run at full speed and reveal my lineage. (I decided it wasn't worth my shoes.) "Ye're no' even tryin'!"

That's kind of the point, I thought as I struggled to resist the urge to flat out sprint with a two-ton raptor after me.

There was a heavy thump somewhere high above me, and I look up in time to see a smooth, rustic blue jaw open to release a squawking cawâ€"it had jumped on top of the wall!

I held in a yelpâ€"obviously quiet was better with this dragon, if it could hear me moveâ€"and dove around another turn. "Today," Gobber called, "is all about ATTACK! Nadders are quick, ligh' on their feetâ€"yer job is to be quicker, an' lighter."

My eyes turned to the sky and I sighed. This would've been my day if my Gifts weren't a secret.

There were thumps somewhere to my leftâ€"didn't the Manual say something about throwing spines? Nervous, I turned to my right, and heard Fishlegs yell outâ€"I was almost worried for a moment before I heard the big boy say, "I'm really beginning to question your teaching methods!"

(I had to give him credit; it took him two days to get to that point. At the forge, it had taken me four.)

Gobber, just as he'd been with me, seemed not to care much. "Look fer

it's blind spot." I couldn't see him, being on the other side of the Ring, but he sounded boredâ€"guess us _running for our lives_ wasn't entertaining enough for him after all. "Ev'ry dragon 'as one. Find it, 'ide in it, an' strike!"

_Strike_â€"yeah, that wasn't something I'd be doing with my axe melted into the wall. Looks like I was aiming for another nice fail for this lesson. I heard Ruffnut and Tuffnut run into the Nadder and turned away from the area, still thinking.

Maybe I'd still be able to ask Gobber about the Fury, scrape some use out of the dayâ€|

"Blind spot yes. Deaf spot, mmm, not so much." I hit his side of the Ringâ€"alongside Astrid and Snotloutâ€"as he was chuckling at the twins' predicament. I slid to a stop in front of him.

Even if there wasn't any extra information, maybe he could help with my problem. "Soâ€"how would one sneak up on a Night Fury?" I asked.

Gobber scrubbed at his face. "No one's ever found one and lived to tell the tale NOW GET IN THERE."

Like I didn't know that already. "Well okay, but _hypothetically_â€" "

"Hiccup!"

The quiet, urgent hiss snapped my attention awayâ€"Astrid and Snotlout were crouched by one of the walls. She was waving, for me to get down and be quiet; my cousin was just glaring at me.

It must've been close. I went over to the wall and crouched low. Astrid glanced around the edge of the wall before ducking back.

Her hands flew quickly, pointing to us and doing some weird motion in the air. Before I could even make a confused "Huh?", she nodded like she'd been understood perfectly, turned, and silently rolled over her shield to the other side of the gap I assumed had the Nadder inside of it.

I glanced at Snotlout. "Erâ€|What was that?" I hissed, hoping he'd understood.

"Hot," he said, before following her exactly.

Well, at least _what_ he did gave me something of a hint, even if he was too thick-headed to manage anything verbal. I ducked forward, landing heavily on my shield first like the others hadâ€"the problem was, the others had maybe thirty pounds of muscle on me, so while they lifted their shields and finished their rolls, I got yanked back and flat onto my back.

Uuak?

My head snapped to the side. \$hit it was right there!

It took my full speed to get away from the snapping teeth, and I zoomed around a corner, slowing almost immediately to keep from

getting seen moving that fast. Loki must've been smiling on me for once, because no one was in the corridor I stopped in.

"_HICCUP!_"

I winced. Gobber always saw anyway. At least I was away from the thingâ€"it was back up on the walls, but had lost track of me.

It was a short trip back to Gobber's side, even moving slowly and quietly. I could hear the Nadder shifting around in the background. When I made it to the Ring wall, Gobber was glaring down at me.

Wincing again, I started with, "Sorry." And continued with, "They probablyâ€| they probably take the day off? Y-you know, like a cat." I was nearly shoved to the side as the twins ran by, but I ignored themâ€"probably chasing one another for some kind of imagined slight again. "Has anyone ever seen one napping?"

"HICCUP!" Gobber yelled.

"What, I didn't evenâ€" "

"HIC-CUUUUP!"

I turned at the name from behind me, and nearly had a heart attack at the sight of _falling walls_ and _falling dragon_ and _falling Astrid_ with a very big axe!_

The impact was hard and sudden, and had _her_ on _top_ of meâ€"not entirely my idea of a bad situationâ€| in every other scenario except this one. Angry dragon and her axe in my shield? Kinda killing the mood.

"Oooh, love on the battlefield!" Tuffnut apparently didn't agree.

"She could do better," Ruffnut pointed out, and _ouch_.

Astrid, after some forceful pulling, got untangled. When she looked up, I saw fear enter her eyes.

Suddenly, she was yanking at the handle of the axe stuck in my shield, nearly pulling my arm off! "Heyâ€"owâ€"here, let meâ€" "

She ignored me, _stepped on my face_, and tore the shield off. I curled into my normal positionâ€"arms and legs protected by sturdier chest and backâ€"and only looked up when the sound of splintering wood and warbling, injured dragon met my ears.

"Well done Astrid," Gobber commented, sounding satisfied of his entertainment. His tone was decidedly harsher when he said my name. "Hic_cup_â€" "

I uncurled and glanced at him. "Yeah, yeah, I know," I muttered, sighing heavily. "Nails."

Astrid had turned around and was glaring at me. "Is this some kind of a _joke_ to you?" she demanded.

I flinched at the all-too common words from a very uncommon source and felt the blood leave my face. Thankfully, she didn't continue that line of thought. "Our parents' war is about to become ours." She thrust the axe into my face. "_Figure out_ which side you're on."

With that, the only person my age in the village who'd never said a word against me turned and marched out of the destroyed arena, the rest of the group following her, and leaving me on the floor in the ruins.

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it! See you tomorrow!
**

PEACE,

~Tibki

5. Chapter 5

Hey y'all.

PLEASE READ PLEASE READ PLEASE READ

Two things before you start on today's chapter:

a, it has been brought to my attention by the lovely Sinewyk, through a review, that a rather frustrating aspect of this story is the fact that I haven't explained ~why~ Hiccup is hiding his Gifts-after all, he's not Clark Kent. So what if his secret got out? What would happen?

Bad things. The scene where I explain this comes later, though, so as a non-spoilery explanation for those who want it (those who don't want it anyway, and want to wait until the scene, skip the part bracketed): [[[[He's, firstly, afraid because his father's drilled it into his head from birth, and hiding is now instinctual; secondly, he's afraid of how a village he's come to almost see as family will react. Will they fear him? Judge him worse than they do now, as Thor's Useless Grandson instead of the Useless Chief's son? Will they not believe him and scoff, and since it involves their religion, never really forgive him? Or, will they not believe him but think he might be related to Loki instead, and kill or ship him off the island?]]]]

b, I should've stated this earlier, but within this story is something of a game. Working my own moral into this story was difficult using the outline of another story, whose moral I didn't really feel comfortable erasing; so instead of explaining it outright, I used codewords and crossed my fingers that my lovely readers would pull the moral out themselves, by paying special attention to those certain parts.

**That ain't gonna work if y'all don't know the codewords, so I apologize for being an idiot and forgetting to state them. The codeword is: GIFT. Apart from referring immediately to Hiccup's

powers, I was very careful when using this word, and when it is in the story, you can bet there is probably symbolism (funny and/or very important to the statement I'm trying to make in this story) inside that sentence. Up until this point, the symbolism has been little or almost none; from now on, I'd pay attention.**

That's it! I thank you for your patience, and as a _gift_ (just checking to see if you were watching) of gratitude, I give you, today: THE FORBIDDEN FRIENDSHIP SCENE.

Plus a little.

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FIVE</p>

You wanna know how Gobber and Dad kept a six-year-old likeâ€"well, like _me_â€"from using all-too-conspicuous semi-semi-divine abilities in public? When the same kid couldn't even manage to _not_ blurt out that Gobber had a slot for an extra card in one of his "lucky poker hooks"?

By threatening me with nails.

Not physicallyâ€"Vikings are tough and mean, but not monsters. See, the best part of working in a forge is, by far, the _making_â€"weapons, ornaments, custom pieces needed for constructing houses or ships, helmets, my own inventions. Not only do you craft and turn and shape the metal, but you also make it yours, or the customer's, by flourishing it with designs and making it individual.

Gobber had once told me that well-made swords sang when sharpened. Whenever I make anything, I strive to make them sing like thatâ€"and if they aren't sharp, then I make them sing to the eyes. Engravings are my favoriteâ€"inlays are hard, I'm still learning thoseâ€"but I can turn wire easily after practicing so long, and, if I do say so myself, I have some real masterpieces in the back.

That being said, the _worst_ part of forging is repetitiveness. Ironically, that's why Dad made me Gobber's apprentice, on the dual hopes that he could keep me in control and that the nonstop hammering and lifting, and pounding and moving, and _hammering_ and _lifting_, and _pounding_ and _moving_ that the iron needed to be worked, would build me up.

(Nothing happened in either the control or the growth departments.)

I _hate_ the repetitiveness, and I _hate_ not being able to add my own spin on things.

I. Hate. Making. Nails.

You put a bar of metal with the preferred width into the fire. Take it out, pound at the end 'til it's sharp. Cut it off at the right length, use a nail header and pound at the top 'til it's flat. Stick in water to cool. Repeat with remaining metal until a minimum of 100

nails are reached for the day.

It's so boring.

They are necessary for life on Berk. Extremely so. I'm aware of this, because even when I'm not being punished for using my Gifts where someone might see, _I'm filling a bazillion orders for the dam^ things_.

And even though there's so many _kinds_, it doesn't help, because that just means I have to go back and forth for different widths and lengths of metal. Shields use thick and short shafts with rounded heads that have me slaving over every last shape just to get it _exactly like the others_. Chairs and furniture want wood nailsâ€"thin heads, thin shafts, long. Houses: square heads, thick shafts, longer. Ships: will take me _ages_ because every one is the size of like eight house nails put together.

Again: _I. Loathe. Nails._

So, naturally, _nails_ are my punishment for making the conscious decision to run in public.

Forget my idea to visit the dragon before lunch. I'll be making nails until at least halfway to dinner.

If not the rest of my life.

I grumbled and lifted my hammerâ€"smaller than Gobber's by about five timesâ€"away from the nail, picking it out of the header with my gloves and tossing it into the bucket to cool.

"Five hundred twenty three gagillion, six hundred thousand and _eight_ is done!" I yelled to the other side of the forge.

"Well good!" _BANG._ Gobber was making a sword for the littlest daughter of the Great Hall's main cook, Heinkel the Horrible (he was as bad a chef as the name implied, though don't say it to his face if you like yours where it is). It'd be small and dull, but beautifully engraved and colored blue and white, like the sea and the sky. I wanted to weep for jealousy. "Ye're nearly 'alfway to the end! Keep goin', Hicca!"

Sighing, I pulled the metal back out of the fire.

The worst part about thisâ€"well, second worstâ€"was that it gave me time to think. Most of the time, the entire island, _except_ for me, agreed that me thinking was a bad thingâ€"but in this case?

Is this some kind of a joke to you?

Well, it was no secret that mostâ€"maybe just three-quarters, half if I was being optimisticâ€"of the village thought I was a joke. It might still sting a little when they laughed, but I was mostly used to that. My dad thought everything I did _was_ a joke, and I was pretty used to that too (didn't mean it hurt less; on the contrary). I was used to the idea of being a joke coming from them.

But Astrid?

The metal wasn't the right color of _straw_. I put it back in the flames, stepped closer, and blew into themâ€”ignoring Gobber's shout to not burn the place down again. They roared upwards, and when I pulled it back out, I realized I'd have to wait a while until it was cooled to the right color.

Astrid, the blonde young Valkyrie of the village, who never even realized when I was there? Who hadn't said a word against me in so long?

I know it was just because of what had happened with Erikâ€”her entire family believes they owe me somethingâ€”but the fact remains, when everyone else laughs or jeers or snorts or even just contemptuously dismisses, she meets my eyes for a second and then gets on with life.

It's sad, how much that single second of acknowledgement means to me. And how badly one sentence from her could tear me to shreds.

I had to wonder if she saw the way the blood fled my face, when she said that.

"â€”Hiccup?"

"Yaaah!" I jumped at the sudden voice and sent the still-white-hot rod flying. Astridâ€”speak of the devilâ€”had to duck to avoid getting it to the eye, and when it slammed into the wall, it thankfully hit a stone block and not thatching.

(Gobber really _would_ kill me if I burnt the place down again.)

I stared at the girl, gaping at her. She glanced over her shoulder at the rod still on the ground.

"Youâ€”gonna pick that up?"

Due to wooden flooring, I realized a ground fire was just as likely as a wall fire andâ€”the floor was smoking already. "Aw, _Hel!_"

My left hand grabbed the tongs by reflex and sheer luck and more of that carried the hot rod away from the spot _without_ there being flames left. Sighing in relief, I went back to the anvil and looked at the white part closelyâ€”there was some imperfection on it, now.

Muttering under my breath, I stabbed it into the _trash_ water bucket. It was useless, and useless metal was the bane of my existence.

Now that my shock at so suddenly seeing her was gone, I realized that _Astrid_ was standing in my side of the forge. Some little spark of resentment in my heart curled me away from being kind like normal, but I couldn't help being polite.

"Hey Astrid," I said. Beyond that, though, I barely looked at her as I tweaked the rotten bit off and put the metal back into the fire.

"Doing your punishment for nearly killing us in the Ring?"

Her question was sharp as a sword and I flinched. I hadn't nearly killed usâ€| had I? "No," I admitted quietly. The metal was the right color again, so I took my hammer to it to start the taper. "Something else."

"Well, do you have a minute?"

That made me look upâ€"why would she need one of my minutes? She must've read my confusion, because she blew her hair out of her face and held up her axe.

My eyes snapped to it immediately and I couldn't help but break it down. It was a bit chipped, probably edging over to one side; the handle looked worn, which meant lots of use, but also a slippery grip. It needed a sharpening, a re-balancing, and maybe some carving to make new handholds.

"I'd ask Gobber, but he looked busy."

"And meanwhile, I'm whiling the hours away as usual," I muttered, before shaking my head. "Hold on a second."

I moved the rod into the bucket of waterâ€"putting it into the fire to hold would melt itâ€"and took off my arm guards, dropping them on the table on the other side of the room. I walked back and held both hands out for the weapon.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, before dropping it into my arms one-handed. Not surprised at the weight, but still not able to carry it, I grunted and half-dropped the thing.

"Careful!" Astrid snapped. "That axe was my mother's."

I grunted again and managed to lift it with both arms. "Okay. Razor-sharp battleaxe. Coming right up." The trip to the grindstone was longer than I'd've liked, but at least once I got the thing turning, all I had to do was hold the blade down.

Sparks started flying and I focused on the sharpening while Astrid started looking around the shop, running her fingers over the completed swords and shields on the walls.

"This isn't an apology, you know."

The words surprised me, unfortunatelyâ€"I dragged the axe across the stone the wrong way and carved the chip into a gaping hole.

I winced and glanced overâ€"she wasn't looking. In fact, she wasn't facing me at all. She was looking at the rack of weapons, her shoulders stiff.

"It's not. If you tell anyone it is, I'll hunt you down."

After 15 years of living with emotionally compromised Vikings, it wasn't hard to guess what she meant. "What's there to tell?" I asked in return, trying to quietly scramble a new axe together before she noticed I'd broken it. Hopefully she'd find something curious to keep her attention onâ€"

"What's in here?"

She's in my room!

"Nothing! You're not actually supposed to go in there, it'sâ€"it's employees only, andâ€" "

"What _is_ all of this?" she asked, half walking inside. Astrid lifted a paper, inspecting it, and I made myself turn away.

Though it went against _everything_ inside of me to have her walking amongst my plans, I probably wouldn't have a better chance to replace her axe head unnoticed, so I had to leave her to her exploration.

"Uhâ€"nothing, just someâ€" | upper level development," I said, running back to the axe. "Confidential. Can't really talk about it."

Her staff was loose enough to twist out manuallyâ€"if she noticed the difference in the blades, I'd tell her that was why I put in a new head. The broken head went into the scrap pile and I dragged a new one from the stock Gobber built up on every day, throwing it into a vice so I could turn the old handle into it.

"The Mutilator?" I heard her ask.

"Yeah." I took out a smaller vice to force the handle deeper into the axe, so it wouldn't come out. "Basically, it uses twin-weighted counter-levers to launch crisscrossing blades in four different directions. The Mangler's like it's less bloody, more focused on _catching_ instead of _killing_, cousin."

(I'd spent a lot of yesterday thinking about how I'd spent more time on the gentler Mangler rather than the more fatal Mutilator. Did some part of me know, even months ago, that I wouldn't be able to kill a dragon?)

"How do you hold it?" she asked.

"Well, you don't." I shook off my thoughts to answer her question. That was always the irking point for other people looking at my inventionsâ€"no way to hold or use it themselves. There was only one analogy I could find to help them understand. "You shoot it. Like a crossbow."

"Oh. Mm, well, I'm more of a take it down with an axe and then lob its head off kinda girl. Kinda the Viking way, right?"

"Go Vikings," I replied, pulling it out of the vice and back onto the whetstone just in time for her to come back out.

She knew enough to keep away from the flying sparks, but sat down on the opposite side of the bench, blue eyes watching me carefully.

Once it was sharp to the point of splitting hairs, I moved it to the bench but held up a hand when she went to take it back. A quick trip to the back brought out a few of my engraving tools.

"Your handgrips are wearing down." Astrid nodded, and I got to work deepening the ruts.

There was a quiet moment before her next question. "Was that little room whereâ€|?"

She trailed off, her voice sounding uncharacteristically soft. I looked up and met her eyes, the spark in them fading away to nothing as memories swirled in her gaze.

I remembered the day too. I also knew just how much not to tell her. "Where I took Erik, yeah. The doors were burning, and I knew that the floor was built above the ground in one placeâ€"I grabbed one of Gobber's aprons to use as a tent and pried up the floorboard. Don't remember much after, besides waking up to the ashes next morning."

Astrid nodded, her eyes almost misty. "We owe you, you know. For what you did."

I nodded. I'd tried to tell them that they really didn't, but my dad had explained it as a matter of honor for them; telling them no would mean I pitied them. No one pitied the Hoffersons, not for long anyway.

This was her not-apology; for stepping on my face, for yelling. It wasn't great, but it was the best I'd gotten from everyone not Gobber on this island, so I'd take it happily.

Though I was done with the handgrips, I hesitated before giving it back to her. I don't know what it was, but when I ran my hands down the smooth wood, something inside of it resonated with me.

It was deep in my chest, settled somewhere behind my heart. The axe. Something about it was bigger than it seemed, greater, justâ€| more than a simple axeâ€|

"Uhâ€| Hiccup? You in there?"

I jolted out of my trance and glanced at her before looking back down at the axe. I removed my hand. "Astrid, did, uh, did your mom name it, before she gave it to you?"

Astrid shook her head. "Didn't have to. Reginleif's been in the family for generations. Nearly lost a few times, though." She scowled. "We don't really talk about the idiots who managed that."

Reginleifâ€"she was one of the Valkyries, the holy warrior goddesses who brought fallen heroes to Valhalla. It meant 'daughter of the gods', which wasn't too uncommon a name for a weapon, but that and the feeling I got from it?

"I could carve the name into the handle?" I offered.

Astrid's eyebrow rose, delicate as a rose-thorn. "Why? It's not like I'm going to lose it, right?"

Thatâ€"that question was a trap, and at the end of that trap there was pain. "Of course not!" I said quickly. "You would never, butâ€"I dunno, just for future prosperity? Just in case?"

She frowned at me, crossing her arms. "Why do you want to do it?"

Unable to answer truthfully, because I didn't know either, I just shrugged. "Putting off the nails," I said instead.

Astrid rolled her eyes and flapped a hand in assent.

I kept the lettering smallâ€"no need to risk the wrath of the Hoffersons if they didn't approve of thisâ€"but neat and clean, and in a few moments I was done.

"There ya go, one battle axe." I stepped away and let Astrid pick it up, swing it around a little.

She blinked in surprise. "Whoa. This is a lot easier to handleâ€"I never even noticedâ€"What did you do to this?"

I shrugged and went back to my anvil, putting the rod back into the heat. "Rebalanced it. Settled the curves on either end and made sure it was sharpened evenly. We're a full-service outfit here, you know."

It was then that Gobber came in, holding a tiny blue sword and scabbard with half-finished detailing that I physically itched for. (Gobber's casual glare my way told me my fingers had twitched into a blur at the sight of it, too.) "Wha's all this yappin'â€"oh. Hello, Astrid. Ye be needin' somethin', lass?"

"Hey Gobber," she greeted, not seeing my stop motions. "Hiccup handled it."

Gobber's eyes narrowed. "Did 'e now? While he was sup'posed to be workin' on nails?_"

Astrid seemed to realize she'd said something wrong, but all I could do was wince. "Redo the last batch for spares?" I asked, weary already.

Gobber smiled and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "An' the one before tha' one too. Kneelouse's shield came in again and ye need ta replace the bits." He winked. "Maybe if ye work fast, I'll take pi'y an' let ye do the seafoam on the hilt, with the whi'e enamel?"

He didn't even have the entire, beautiful word enamel out before I was running to go get Kneelouse's shield.

* * *

><p>Enameling is gorgeous, fulfilling work, but it was longâ€"it was late afternoon by the time I was done and could go back to the cove.<p>

Carrying a shield from training, I was almost all the way out of the village before the memory of the upset and hungry dragon fishing in vain hit me. My stomach squirmed, remembering my own hungry nights, and I doubled back and grabbed one of the few cod left in the storehouse.

There were hunting parties out, so I didn't dare run, leaving me to

think while I walked.

Dad didn't tell a lot of peopleâ€”I only know because I get ignored often enough in my own house to overhear so-called 'private Chief things' between him and Gobberâ€”but Berk's actually in pretty big trouble. The dragons raided almost every clear night this summer, and got smarter with each attack; we'd discovered the hard way that they were also hunting from the forest surrounding our village's rear, and there were water dragons in the ocean going after the fish.

That's rightâ€”they go after anything to eat on land, in the water, and in our homes. So what's left for the Vikings?

Pretty much nothing, or it will be soon.

Now, it was far from the first time we'd had to tighten our belts because of the dragonsâ€”over the 300 years the Hooligans had lived on this island? No, we were all used to a little hunger. But Grandmother Gothi had predicted a long and harsh winter ahead of us, with many deaths on the horizonâ€”Dad wanted to stockpile. But balancing a stockpile for the winter, with enough food to keep us alive now, along with enough things left alive to let the population of deer and sheep and other things replenish next spring?

It wasn't easy. Dad was trying, and I know no one in the village blamed him, but it seemed like an impossible task. But on the bright side, Vikings are kinda good at those; pure stubbornness can break a lot of mountains.

Still, I glanced down at the cod I was holding by the gills as I neared the cove. Maybe I'd justâ€”| half it with the dragon. I needed to eat too, after all.

Confident that the hunting parties were more south of here, I sped up and did a quick search around the edges of the cove. There was an easy entrance right to the floorâ€”a lot better than climbing down that cliff from my first visit.

I slowed and walked forward, not wanting to scare the thing. There wasn't anything I could see through the gapâ€”| maybe it needed some encouragement.

I threw the fish out into the open; it landed on grass and dirt with a flat thump.

Nothing happened.

Well, at least it probably won't immediately attack me if I come outâ€”|_

Ignoring that line of thought, I tried to go forwardâ€”and promptly got the shield stuck between the boulders walling the entrance.

A tug proved that it wasn't budging, from either side, so I abandoned it and ducked into the cove, picking up the fish as I went.

It was beautiful insideâ€”shadowy, with the soon-to-start-setting sun too low to brighten the entire place, and a lot larger than looking at it from above made it seem. The walls had to be nearly fifty feet

high.

The grass under my boots, the last of the summer blades, was the same soft green as the ivy and the branches all around. The lake was reflecting black and pink, and smooth as cut glass at the moment. There wasn't even the sound of any birds.

They'd probably scattered at the presence of a big predator; the dragon had to be close by, then. I swallowed nervously, but for some reason, wasn't too concerned for my life at this pointâ€”just the regular everyday scared-of-something-about-to-pop-out-at-me kind of terrified.

Rththththth

The rattle made me gasp and jumpâ€”it had been behind me the entire time! Sitting on a sunny rock, it's wings spread for balance and it's gaze more than a little suspicious, the black scales stood out against the sun-bleached boulders.

It leapt down from the rock to my level, circling around me. I turned to keep my eyes towards it, and saw it sniff and croon, even as its back and wings were kept highâ€”big, to intimidate. It didn't work well when I could see the desperation in its eyes.

It wanted the fish. Poor thing was hungry. I stretched out my arm, offering it.

It took several steps forward, slowly, most of its body still angled away. I blinked several times when its pupils widened as it crooned, opened its mouth to take itâ€”

Then suddenly it saw something and jumped back, baring teeth and growling dangerously. I flinched away from the sound.

Weapon!

Later, I would attribute the word to my earsâ€”at the moment, I thought that the word came from my own head, as a sudden realization that I probably wouldn't have made otherwise.

Of course! My seaxeâ€”I'd completely forgotten I was wearing it. It must've seen it and recognized it, from before, when I cut it out of the bola.

I moved the fish to my other hand and showed it my hip, where the blade was strapped to my belt. The wings rose like sails, and even though I knew it was just a tactic, it had me believing it was a lot bigger than I figured it was.

Reaching for the seaxe was a test of courageâ€”it growled whenever I moved too fast and loudly when I got too close to the hiltâ€”but I picked it out with my fingernails and threw it to the ground.

The dragon growled and motioned to the pond.

Definitely intelligent, then. I kicked the knife onto my boot, and flung it into the water.

The second the splash resonatedâ€"it was like an entirely new dragon was sitting in front of me. The wings folded in, it's head and earflaps came up and it's eyes widened.

Maybe it would trust me now. I held out the fish again, with both hands.

It slunk forward, still a little reluctantâ€"I could hear its stomach making noises, though, so it didn't stop.

When it was right in front of me, its mouth opened: nothing but pink gums.

"Huh. Toothless," I said, frowning when I remembered seeing flashes of white during our first 'meeting'. "Coulda sworn you hadâ€"

I yelped and flinched back as small, pearly fangs _shot_ out of the gums and, like Thor's own lightning, it snatched the fish out of my hands, lifting its head to bite and swallow.

"Teeth," I finished weakly. The dragon gurgled in front of me and there was almost _amusement_ in its eyes.

There was no time for me to even react to that before it licked its lips and looked over at me.

Oddly, even when it started advancing, I knew it wasn't going to eat _me_â€"it was just after more fish. Still, I stumbled back and away as it came closer; those teeth had been little, but some of the sharpest things I'd ever seen.

I fell back, hit a rock. It kept coming and I swallowed.
****_No_â€"no, I don't have any more_!**** I hissed, clearing my throat as pain shot through it. I _would_ be the only person unlucky enough to pick up a throat sickness _in the summer_.

As if it had understood me, that made the dragon pause. It cocked its head, and then its eyes rolled back as something gurgled in its throat. Believing it to be a fireball, I tensed in preparation untilâ€"

â€"until it spat half the fish back into my lap.

"Urgh." The thing, slimy _before_, was now covered in dragon slime on top of the _original_ slimeâ€"I didn't even know there was such a _thing_ as dragon slime, but it was clear, sticky, and ropy.

Theâ€| giftâ€| deposited, it actually leaned back and sat on its haunches. I stared, unable to think of a time I'd ever even heard of another dragon capable of doing something like that.

I sat there, holding the fish in my hands, staring at it. It kept my gaze, apparently waiting for something. When I looked around to see what it could be waiting _for_, it crooned and got my attention back.

I blinked at it. It nodded to the fish.

Oh no.

Oh Thor, that was not how I'd wanted to split the fish. I'd wanted it gutted, cleaned, cookedâ€”not ripped in half and partially digested.

But the face on the dragon clearly wasn't giving me another choice so, with every reluctance possible, I put the fish to my mouth and bit right through the skin, into the flesh. I had to be going crazy; but the dragon made an approving sound.

It was cold, and the skin was slimy, and the muscle was slimier. I held it in my cheeks and grunted with a false smile, hoping that would be the end of that.

The dragon swallowed.

The dragon. Swallowed.

Oh c'mon! I forced my throat into the motions, and caught it before it came back up again. Once it was gone, I shuddered and vowed to never eat fish again. The dragon's tongue made an appearance, licking its chops as if to say Yum, huh?

I smiled weakly at it, unbelieving that I'd just done that and it stared at me oddly, beforeâ€”

Black, scaly lips pushed up, revealing a gap between the gums.

He'sâ€”| he's smiling at me.

Oh my gods. Enthralled, I moved forward and raised my hands, only to earn a growl and another showing of the teeth.

The dragon took offâ€”however much he couldâ€”and landed far away, on the other side of the lake. I didn't hesitate in following.

He opened his mouth and released a stream of fire, turning in a circle to make a bed of flaming ashes. I snuck up and sat down cross-legged in front of him, watching, curious, as he laid down with a happy croonâ€”until a bird sang and took off.

The look on his face as he watched it fly was longing.

The dragon saw me, and I waved. Unimpressed, he laid back down and lifted his tail to his head, opening to fin to hide his face.

I wonder what it feels like. I crawled forward to touch the fin, but got caught.

Almost on instinct, I sped backwards and instantly hit my head on the stone wall that had been a good 50 yards away half a second ago.

"Ow!"

I slid down the wall, cradling my head. The dragon let out a sound that was almost like a snort before getting out of his ash bed and moving to a tree.

He hung in it, upside down like a bat, and I was promptly forgotten

as he started snoring.

Huh. He must not have had a lot of interactions with people, if he didn't find that weird. I rubbed the knot forming on back of my headâ€”never run backwards at speeds where you're moving too fast for your eye to see what you're passingâ€”and saw the tracks I'd left in the earth.

With a sigh, I started to kick the dirt back into the rut and holes. No need to leave more evidence lying around.

There was nothing and no one waiting for me at Berk, and I didn't want to face the empty house, so I spent the afternoon in the cove. I killed time by making patterns in the dirt with sticks and rocks, drawing when the soil was soft enough.

So far, I'd done one of the Berk crest and of the Hofferson symbol, a falconhawk, and Thor's hammer, Mj  lnir. They were off in a corner, and I'd found a new, still fairly sunny and stripped of grass spot by the lake.

I was sitting on a small rock, doing my latest one with a stick. S  l had started her journey west a while ago and it was starting to get chillier, especially without my vestâ€”I'd tried to find it, without luckâ€”but I didn't mind too much. It was Berkâ€”cold was a way of life.

(I still shivered.)

A soft _thump_ and a blur of brown fur made me leap, and then gape in front of me. My vest, a little dirty and grassy, was lying on the ground, though I'd thought it lost once it had fallen onto the dragon's face from the cove's edge. It had been tossed over my head from behind me, and I twisted to see where it had come from.

No one was thereâ€”though I could've sworn I saw a glimpse of toxic green before the upside-down dragon closed his eye again, obviously feigning sleep.

So that's how its gonna be. Grateful anyway, I paused in my sketch to clean and then pull on my vest, sighing happily at the small amount of warmth it provided. Being this small meant the cold hit you hard.

Figuring it was better to play the dragon's game, I turned back to my drawing, ignoring him.

Until I heard a soft warbling over my shoulder. Very close.

Surprised but not even having to look to know who and what it was, I drew the dragon's eyes into the sketchâ€”round and taking up most of his face, but leaving his wide, flat forehead. He kept crooning behind me, approving and curious, before suddenly stopping and walking away.

Confused, I looked over my shoulder and felt my eyebrows rise at the sight before me.

The dragon was ripping a sapling out of the dirt. Once it was free,

he brought it over to where I was, letting one end drag on the ground and bring up a line in the soil. He danced past me, going onto his hind paws when necessary, and then around, spinning in circles at times. He even glanced backâ€”I looked away, and realized he was looking back at a _model!_

He was drawing _me_!

With one final tap of the massive tool, he flung it away and stepped aside, looking down and nodding happily.

I stood and gaped at the ground. It actuallyâ€”well, it was no masterpiece, but there was a face and hair, with basic features. It was me!

Awed, I walked to leave the center and get a better viewâ€”suddenly earning a ferocious growl in the process.

The sound froze me untilâ€”_line!_â€”made me realize what was happening. I glanced downâ€”my foot was on the edge of "my" eye. Glancing back to the dragon, I lifted my foot.

He purred, his eyes wide and ears high.

â€”I put my foot down again.

RRRRR

â€”foot up.

Mrrrrrrr

(down)

RRRRRRR

(up)

Mrrrrrrr

The next time I put my foot down, it was on untouched dirt, and the dragon stayed purring. Huffing a laugh, I turned my attention to trying to get out of the picture without stepping on any of the linesâ€”it was complicated, made me turn completely around a few times to find a spot for my feet.

Entranced and focused on my steps, I didn't even notice where I was heading. When a heavy and hot breath of air smelling vaguely of fish hit my neck, I froze and turned around.

The dragon was right there, towering a few feet above me. His eyes were green and wide, softer than I'd seen them yet.

I wondered what scales felt like. My hand stretched out to feel, and was received with a suspicious glare and a soft growl, show of teethâ€”but no running.

I drew back, hesitating. Maybe he didn't want to be touchedâ€”I couldn't blame him, being all alone and injured, I wouldn't trust too easy either.

Maybe I should let the trust be his choice.

I closed my eyes and turned my head away, just in case this turned ugly, and left my hand hanging in the air.

His choice, now.

There was a moment where my heart raced, where my breath didn't want to come in or out, so I held my chest still.

When something soft and warm, a little rough, touched my fingers, I nearly flinched, ready for fire and pain. But nothing came. I looked up, awed that I was touching a Night Fury.

Until he drew away, toxic eyes blinking. Then, what came instead, was worse than fire and pain could ever be.

"You're certainly a stupid little Squish, aren't you?"

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it! Tell me what you think, and your opinion on what I said above (the game, why Hiccup hides) through a review, if you want!

PEACE,

~Tibki

6. Chapter 6

Hey y'all!

As always, a million bajillion thanks to everyone who read and reviewed and/or favorited and/or followed! You're the lights of my life!

Please pay attention to the **"bold beginning and end"** sentences. Those're kinda important; explanation is in-story.

Hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SIX</p>

The words tore into my ears like barbed wire and swords and I cried out, clutching at both sides of my head.

It only lasted for a second, thank goodness, but even that second was too long to me. **"_O_ _w_!"** I yelled again, once it had stopped. My throat was sore from shouting, and grated with every word. **"What in Thor's name was _that_?"**

"What in the fires of Niflâ€"?" A surprised burst of air.

***S**urtur's great realm! You're a _talking_ Squish**!"** The voiceâ€"smooth, confident almost to the point of arrogance and right now slightly amused and _very_ shockedâ€"made me look up and spin around, but there was no one thereâ€"|

Except the Night Fury, who had taken several steps back and was now looking at me with curious eyes. _And then it opened its mouth. _**"A** talking Squish! Now I've seen everything. Though, if I were you, I probably wouldn't take your grandfather's name like that. You might lose favor**, "** the voice said, coming _out of the dragon's mouth?!_

The dragon's mouth!

Words!

Words out of the_ dragon's mouth_!

***Y**aa-ah**!"** I jumped back, falling onto my rear and scrambling away. He blinked at me, then cocked his head and flipped up his ears in interest.

***S**o you can _hear_ tooâ€"strange little Squish, aren't you**?"**

***Y**-y-you just spoke _words_**!"**

The ears fell flat to his head and the dragon's pupils narrowed andâ€"gods above if he didn't look _condescending_. ***W**hat _else_ am I supposed to speak**?"**

***Y**ou're a dragon**!"**

***A**nd you're a _very_ observant Squish**, "** he replied, too sincerely, like a parent assuring a stupid child.

***Y**ou're a _talking dragon_**!"**_

(The _look_ the toxic green eyes were giving me now was one I wouldn't forget, ever. From that moment on, he saved it for my most profoundly _stupid_ moments: when I was concerned the other tribes wouldn't accept me as Chief of the Hooligans; when I was worried Astrid wouldn't accept my proposal; when I tried to name my first born son something as idiotic and unVikingly as _Keith_.)

***A**re you done yet**?"** the _dragon_ asked. ***O**r do you take after your grandfather in every way except the physical**?"**

No, no I was not done. My rational mind was currently flying to pieces and I was very close behind it. I didn't even register the insult. I felt like collapsing, but I was already on the ground, so I just took a slow breath and carded my hands into my hair.

***O**ooh gods. I'm dead. Ooooooh gods, I'm dead. The dragon ate me whole and this is just some weird hallucination before I get dragged to Niflheim**."** I looked up to the skies, eyes wide. ***I** never even got tokiss a girl**!"**

"That implies you've kissed a male,**"*** the dragon pointed out.

I shuddered as a memory shifted in the corner of the very dark closet I'd locked it into. **"H**ow about we focus on one trauma at a time, thank you very much**,"** **"** I said, holding a finger out to trauma number one. **"** **"T**he talking dragon is currently taking up most of my mental capacityâ€"I don't need the rest of it ruined, and me left a slobbering mess**."**

He rolled his eyes. **"I**t isn't thatbig a deal**,"** **"** he muttered, settling down some distance away.**

I spluttered. **"N**ot that big a deal! Says the _talking dragon!_ _Not that big a deal!_ You're talking! A dragon is not _supposed_ to talk**!"**

"D**ragons talk all the time**,"** **"** the Fury returned. **"** **"I**t's just that most squishes can't understand us**."**

"W**ell, _I'm_ reading you loud and clear**!"**

The Night Fury looked up, it's toxic green gaze grabbing mine. **"**_**Y**__ou_ are far from any normal Squish, aren't you**?"**

I stiffenedâ€"he had said something earlier, just a quick mention, aboutâ€| **"**Y**ouâ€| know about my grandfather**?"** **"** That was always the safest way to bring it upâ€"even out here, even with a _dragon_, I rarely felt safe enough to say the whole thing out loud.**

"O**f course I do. You only screamed it out for all of Midgard to hear when you cut me out of that trap. You're the descendant of Thor**."** **"** The name made me flinch, and an amused huff came from the dragon. **"** **"H**e won't strike you down for saying his name, you know. Just, not as a swearword**."**

"I **know that**!"** **"** I shook my head and gave the Night Fury a strange look. **"** **"J**ustâ€"_how_ are you capable of human speech**?"**

The dragon looked insulted. **"**W**hy would I speak something like the _squish_ language**?"**

My eyebrows flew high. **"**O**h? Then how is it can I understand you**?"**

The dragonâ€"by OÃ°in and all theÃ†sir, he _chuckled_, the sound a weird chattering croon. **"**I**s your throat hurting**?"**

I put a hand to my neckâ€"it was, had been on odd occasions over the past few days. I figured I'd been catching some kind of cold; being the scrawniest kid on a very wintry island meant I was sick almost constantly. **"**Y**eah, wh**â€"?"**

I had to stop mid-sentence. Or should I say, mid-_growl_.

Too busy with the _good Baldr a talking _dragon thing, I hadn't noticed, but now that it'd been brought to my attentionâ€|.

No words were coming out of my mouth. Instead, it was growlsâ€"and warbles, and croons, and little cries, just like I'd heard the Night Fury make minutes ago.

_No fu(king way. _

My eyes grew huge. _No fu(king way, no fu(king way, no fu(king
_way_â€| _

The world tilted, and I stumbled, falling onto my rear, and the edges of my vision started turning grey. The dragon looked at me, his gaze something between sympathetic and highly amused. Probably more amused.

T**he language you're speakingâ€"it's called Dragonese**, " he offered.

O**h. S-soâ€|_you_ aren't talking to _me_**. " He shook his head.
I**_'m_ talking toâ€| to a dragon**, " I muttered, hearing a weak croon instead of human words, before fainting dead away.

When I woke up again, my head was throbbing and it was mostly dark out. Night had settled like a soft blanket onto the cove, enveloping everything in sight.

I groaned and sat up, looking around. There was a pair of toxic eyes looking at me from within the shadows of one of the walls, and I could just _barely_ make out the shape of the dragon thanks to the thin sliver of Gmot over my head.

"Whaâ€| what happened?" I muttered. The memory of the talking Night Fury came back, and it wasn't a small amount of relief that surged over me when I recognized the words from my mouth as from my own language. "Oh, thank OÃ°inâ€|"

O**h good, you're awake**, " the dragon's voice made me jumpâ€"it hadn't been a dream?!

Apparently not, because the Night Fury walked out from those shadows, making more growls and warbles as he came closer. ***I**'ve never seen a squish do that beforeâ€"only running around shouting louder than MjÃ¶lnir's strikes**. "***

"Y-you're still talking!" I yelped, scrambling back.

It was dark, but the glowing green eyes let me know that the dragon was very unimpressed. ***Y**ou're really still on this. By the flames of SvartÃ¶lfaheimr, you _are_ Thor's child, aren't you**?"**

"Grandchild," I automatically corrected, just slightly surprised he could understand Norse.

O**bviusly the extra generation didn't dilute the idiocy any**. "

The snark came without me even thinking about it. "Now who's at risk of losing favor?"

The dragon bared his teeth in a growl, but it didn'tâ€"I didn'tâ€"there was no heat behind it. It was like he was just doing it on principle.

While I tried to wrap my mind around the idea of a _non-threatening

growl_, the dragon started walking closer. I tensed, but didn't feel any need to run away, even when the black nose came inches from my midsection.

His nostrils flared and I felt the air blast against my tunic. **"You don't smell sick, do you squishes collapse often?"** he asked, looking up at me with eyes I could only call curious.

The sarcasm was automatic. "Oh, no, just when our worlds are being turned upside down by crazy talking dragon," I drawled, earning myself a flat look. I frowned, another question coming to mind, but I paused before I asked it.

Despite the fact that it had just made me faint_, I was curious"could I still speak like" like him?

Furrowing my brows and licking my lips, I let my Adam's apple drop low in my throat before releasing a rrruuuuaa_ that I somehow understood as, **"Why do you call me squish?"**

I jumped at the sound and put a hand to my throat. The dragon didn't seem to notice my surprise" or maybe he just didn't care. **"Because you're squishy,"** he told me. **"No scales, no claws, barely any teeth"** He pawed towards my chest, gentle with his claws. **"So your kind is easy to just"** squish".

"Oh. Well, that's a pleasant mental image," I said, feeling a little green and pulling away from his claws. On the other hand, the discovery that I could actually control_ which language I was speaking was a small comfort. At least I wasn't stuck speaking" _Dragonese_ forever.

The dragon shrugged before settling on the ground. **"I didn't come up with the word squish_."**

Pulling myself up, I realized again just how close we were"not even a couple of feet"but, strangely, I didn't feel threatened at all. Maybe because I was speaking to him, talking to a rational being instead of some wild monster that in could only guess would do with a tiny hiccup-treat so close by.

Curious and probably suicidal, I carefully stretched my hand out again. The dragon's eyes narrowed a little, but this time he didn't growl or warn me away. **"Can"** I cleared my throat, **"Can I"**

The Night Fury watched me with narrowed pupils for another second before huffing through his nostrils and leaning his head forward, sliding his soft nose into my palm.

The scales felt smooth and cool, but there was an underlying heat that I couldn't miss, and I sat there in complete awe. An amazed, open-mouthed grin crossed my face and I couldn't help but laugh in wonder.

I was touching_ a dragon_! Dear "sir in Asgard°, I was touching a Night Fury_!

And I didn't even feel afraid! Me, Hiccup the Useless, the Coward of

Berk, unafraid!

The sound of purringâ€”wordless, strangelyâ€”tore me from my astonished trance. Without even having noticed it, I'd started scratching the small pitchy pebbles and by the look on his face, the dragon enjoyed it.

Shocked, I snatched my hand back. The dragon made a noise and stopped purring, and looked up at me. **“H**ey**!”** he snapped, **“W**hy'd you stop, you little flame? That felt good**!”**

Gaping and unable to give a real answer, I just put my hand back and started scratching once more. His eyes closed in bliss and the purring came right back.

Itâ€”his reaction, my unconscious movementâ€”made me realize that it wasn't just that I wasn't threatened or afraidâ€”I was comfortable with him. And he was comfortable with me!

I couldn't understand whyâ€”but we were. Maybe it was the fact that we'd just spent an entire afternoon together, or maybe it was something more, like the feeling in my chest was more. Either way, any of the awkward I usually felt around the tribe or anyone else had faded from my mind, leaving only contentment.

My hand shifted, going higher towards the flaps that I assumed were ears. The purring deepened, and he turned slightly into it, enough for our sides to touch. When I hit a patch of scales that seemed to be peeling, right at the base of his crown, his entire chest shook hard enough to make mine vibrate alongside it. I couldn't help but smile and bring my other hand up too. The thing deep in my chest almost seemed to buzz, or-or purr, like it was happy too, with the huge reptile being so close.

(Not even despite the massive, apex predator being so closeâ€”with the massive apex predator being so close.)

Huge reptile, apex predatorâ€”if I was going to keep scratching his head_ as if he were some sort of weird, talking dog, I couldn't just call him that.

“Do you have a name**?”** I asked, letting my other hand drop and moving the first elsewhere, getting his attention back on me.

“Do I have a what**?”** The little flaps I was scratching behind twitchedâ€”reflex, or I think emotion, like a cat's ears?

“A name. Do you have a name**?”**

The dragon glanced up at me carefully, but quickly smirked. **“W**hy would I need a name**?”** he scoffed. A mischievous glint entered his eye as teeth flashed. His head lifted proudly, nearly pulling himself out of my reach. **“B**esides, it's not as if anyone I come across will ever forget me**.”**

“Well, that's not arrogant at alâ€”ow**!”** He'd used those ears to slap me over the faceâ€”not hard, but it was sudden and unexpected enough to nearly send me sprawling. I rubbed my cheek and muttered stupid lizard in Norse under my breath before adding, **“W**ell,**

uhâ€"I'm Hiccup, anyway**."**

The dragon straightened out of my touch, giving me a weird look for a second before speaking. **"H**iccup. You're allowing me to call you Hiccup**."**

I frowned. **"U**hâ€| yeah? It is my name**."**

He stared at me long and hard for a moment before something seemed toâ€| _soften_ in his eyes. **"H**iccup, then**,"** he said decisively. **"W**hat does it mean**?"**

"It's like a**â€"*** Not knowing how to explain the sensation to someone who probably never had it, I dodged around that. **"W**ell, it's the name we usually give the runt of the litter. It kinda meansâ€| accident**."**

The dragon snorted. **"W**ell-named, then, you scrawny hatchling**."**

"Hey**!"** Oddly I wasn't too insulted or hurt, like I would've been if any of the village called me thatâ€"more amused. I laughed and shoved him in the shoulder. **"I**n that case, I'll name you something _just_ as fitting**!"**

The Night Fury looked at me oddly, then smugly. **"F**irst off, I don't need a nameâ€"second, there is no word you can use to describe me that wouldn't be _majestic_**."**

He spread his wings wide and turned his head, obviously proud. I laughed, and the perfect name popped into my head.

"Toothless it is, then**."**

The wings dropped to the ground in shock and the newly named Toothless gaped at me, eyes wide. **"W**haâ€"you can't name me _that_**!"** he roared indignantly.

"If you're going to make fun of me for being _Hiccup_, I can name you whatever I want**!"** I laughed.

"_**I**__ don't need a name__**!*_*_**" he screeched. He huffed and stood onto all fours, shaking himself to rid his scales of any grass. **"N**o, you know what? I'm not going to try to reason with you. You're obviously a hopeless case. Which I should've expected, because for the gods' sake, you're a _Squish._ _I _am going to _sleep_**."** He walked off, but paused before he'd gotten a few steps away. **"â€|**Thank you. For the fish**."**

The last was quieter, with the soft undertones of true gratitude. He must've been really hungry. **"N**o problem**,"** I answered, sincerely. **"A**ny time**."**

Toothless made himself another ash-bed a little further off and I stretched, standing up. **"S**peaking of, I should probably go get NÃ³ttmal myself**â€|."**

Realization hit me like a joltâ€"_I was late for dinner with the others!_"

"**O**h Hel! NÃ³ttmal! I've gotta run! See you later
Toothless**!"**

The sound of the dragon roaring angrily at me as I sped out of the cove made me laugh.

Under the cover of night, when not even many torches were out, was the only time that I was allowed to run in the village. Even then, I couldn't run at full speedâ€”the tracksâ€”but I could still go marginally faster than usual.

It was due to that fact and that fact alone that I made it to the new outpost (or old, ruined catapult, whichever you prefer) in time for dinner. The others were already there, beginning to roast chicken and lamb. None of them greeted me, but I nodded and received a nod from Gobber as I passed him. He was starting to tell them one of his war storiesâ€”the ones I'd heard a hundred timesâ€”so I felt comfortable enough tuning him out for a while.

The only thing left in the basket of food was another codfish. Suddenly feeling the raw stuff still sitting in my stomach, I glanced up at the dusky heavens. _Why do you all hate me?_

Well. Still better than nothing.

I grabbed the seat farthest from the fire and started cooking the fish as Gobber's story picked up. They were never really the same twiceâ€”it was always a Nightmare that had taken his limbs, but sometimes it was as big as a house and sometimes it was the size of an entire hill; sometimes he lost both his arm and leg at once, sometimes separately.

This was one of the latter stories, where he apparently tasted "delicious" enough for a different dragon to go and have another try.

He gestured to his leg as he said it, earning oohs and aahsâ€”missing limbs really were the best battle scars on Berk. I could tell he had everyone's attention, from Astrid, listening dutifully to an elder, to Ruffnut and Tuffnut, who were captured by the violence and gore; say what you will about his apparent intelligence or attitude, but no one could deny that Gobber the Belch was an excellent story-teller.

"Isn't it weird, to think your arm was _inside_ something else?" Fishlegs asked, holding both of his chicken legs out and waving them in his excitement. "Like, if you'd still had control of it, you could've killed it from the inside by ripping it's heart out or something!"

I imagined something like that happening toâ€”to Toothless and immediately felt sickâ€”dragon or not, that sounded like a gruesome way to go. I didn't believe anyone would have wished that on their worst enemy.

Apparently, I'd once again underestimated Viking brutalityâ€”though he got a few weird looks, no one else looked as downright disgusted as I was.

"I swear, I'm so _angry_ right now!" Snotlout declared, glaring at

his chicken. "I'll avenge your beautiful hand _and_ your beautiful foot! I'll chop off the legs of every dragon I fight!" Though still gruesome to imagine, at least that wasn't tooâ€" "With my face!"

Aaand once again my cousin proves both his idiocy and bloodlust. I groaned and rubbed my head. I _really_ hoped he wouldn't take the Chieftaincyâ€|

"Nah," Gobber suddenly put in, tearing at his own meat and getting our attention. "Uh uh. No. It's the wings and the _tails_ ye really wan'! If it can' fly, it can' ge' away. A _downed_ dragon is a dead dragon."

The words hit me like a boulder.

One tailfin. Downed dragon.

Toothless couldn't fly. I'd seen him crash more than once already in his attempts to escape the cove, and suddenly, in my mind's eye, the fern-adorned walls of the cove transformed into the cold grey rock of the Kill Ringâ€" Vikings swarming into it, grabbing onto the trapped dragon.

And as for what would come after, when they had the stupid, proud Night Fury caughtâ€"no. I knew I shouldn't've caredâ€"he was a _dragon_â€"but the idea still made me sick. Toothless wasn't a mindless beast; he'd spoken to me, had been arrogant and insulted me, and still thanked me, shyly, because he'd been hungry. He had a personality, hadâ€| he had _humanity_.

Bile surged in my gut. I couldn't think about him getting killed bloodyâ€"regardless of the bloodthirst of my tribe, I'd lose my NÃ³ttmal that way.

There had to be a way to avoid that. Steely determination settled into my chest. That dragon would _not_ die. I was going to make sure of it.

***I**'m going to fix this**."**

It came out as a low growlâ€"catching the attention of Tuffnut and Gobber beside me. Momentarily panicked, I cleared my throat quickly and loudly, hoping to pass it off. I chuckled and prayed before I opened my mouth to say, "Fish went the wrong way."

Human speech. Thank Thor.

My lie seemed to work, because Gobber just shrugged, stood, and stretched. "Well. I'm off to bedâ€"and ye should be too! Tomorrowâ€|"

I didn't actually hear the restâ€"I was too busy clambering down from the outpost.

Toothless needed _both_ tailfins to flyâ€"and there was no getting around it, it was either the Mangler or the fall from getting hit by it that had ripped his fin off. It was _my_ fault that he'd lost his flight, that he fell so heavily and gracelessly whenever he tried to escape from the coveâ€"that he couldn't feed himself and had gotten

that hungry.

It was my fault"so I was going to be the one to fix it.

The replacement would have to be ribbed, like it's opposite, and foldable"maybe I could set a ball into some sockets and extend the ribs off of that"

Slipping my thick sleeves on, I got to work, heating the smelter more and more by standing by it and blowing into it. Some of the scrap"including Astrid's old axe head"would probably be useful for material and I needed to be able to shape it. The heads of Kneelouse's old shield nails would supply the balls, and I needed a wooden base to attach it to his tail"

It took me the entire night"S31 was rising when I finally finished it. Toothless's prosthetic tailfin; it matched the designs I'd tacked to my workroom walls perfectly, and I could only hope it would fit right.

"What's that going to do?"

"**Y**aah**!" I leapt and spun around, frantically covering the sketches and designs on my desk, looking for the voice.

The sound was almost like a screech, and Astrid gaped at me for it. I coughed and cleared my throat again, hoping that since she hadn't heard the first time, this time wouldn't be too strange.

Gods I hoped better control over the language came quickly"

"Astrid!" I said, still clearing my throat. The roars and growls I'd been speaking most of yesterday afternoon were tearing into my vocal cords"I don't think the human body was built to make those noises. "Hey"Astrid, hi. Wh"what're you doin' here?"

The question seemed to wipe all forms of previous emotion off her face"something I was glad of, but less so when a dangerous look replaced her freaked-out expression.

"If you tell _anyone_ I'm in here" she said, pointing at my chest and stepping forward. I retreated and held Toothless's new fin close to my chest.

"I"I won't! I swear!"

She glared at me for almost a solid minute, her blue eyes sharp and icy, leaving me torn between feeling petrified and awkward. Suddenly, she looked away and sighed, slamming a fist onto my worktable.

"Gobber is our elder."

I had no idea where she was going with this. "Um. Yes. And"?"

"So we should take his word and follow his instruction without any complaints."

This was sounding weirdly like some of my own thoughts a few days

ago. Only I really doubted the best Viking teenager on Berk had refused to kill a Night Fury, or that the favor had been returned to her. "Well," I said slowly, "I wouldn't say without any complaintsâ€|"

She shot a glare in my direction. "You've been his apprentice forâ€| how long?"

That was a bit of a quick change in subject. "Uhâ€| almost ten years?"

"And judging by that," I hugged the fin closer, defensive of my new invention, "he's been teaching you a lot. Did he use the same methods with you as he is with us?"

Andâ€| now I think I could see where this was heading. "You'reâ€| are you confused by his learning on the job method?" I asked gently, turning my head to the side.

Astrid's axe was suddenly at my throat and I eep-ed in not fright, backing away from her fierce, loathing stare. "I am not confused."

"O-of course not!" I replied quickly. "Wh-why would I even say something like that? Sorry, it's the mouthâ€|"

"Yeah, it's going off right now," she agreed, and I quickly shut up. She narrowed her gaze and pressed it even closerâ€|"I didn't dare breathe at this point. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to tell me how to practice, and then you won't ever tell anyone, EVER, that you said anything to me. Capiche?"

"Capiche?" I squeaked out. "C-could you remove the axe? Please?"

She kept the glare up for the moment, then took the blade away from everything vital. I took a deep gasp of air. Massaging my neck lightly, I glanced over at her. "You know, it's not a bad thing to be able to ask for help."

The glower that earned me burned like Nadder fire, so I quickly dropped that subject. "Well, uhâ€| s-so you wanna know how to practice with Gobber's teaching methods?"

"He doesn't give us set things to go over and keep trying," she muttered, turning away and moving the glare onto my papers. I was a little worried they'd catch fire.

"Uh, nope. No, he does not." I put the fin down safely on the table. "Gobber believes that the best in people comes out in the heat of the momentâ€|"in dragon training, he believes that adrenaline make you capable of, well, everything.

"And, uhâ€| Okay, to be honest, forging is pretty different from dragon training," I said, putting a hand on my project. "I'm not sure you'd learn it the same way, butâ€| when I was learning to make nails, Gobber showed me how it was done once. He pointed out what to do, how it worked, and what mistakes were most common, and then he let me loose.

"It took me aboutâ€| eh, twenty minutes before I nearly burned the

entire place down." I couldn't help but smile, remembering how the old blacksmith had reacted. "He just said, _Well now, ye know no' ta do _tha'_ anymore, righ'?'_ and set me to work again. I thought he was nuts!"

I picked up one of the spare ball bearings and tossed it to Astrid, who caught it deftly and peered at it in confusion. "Every mistake I made was made on my own, and though he explained what had happened and why, most of the time I justâ€¦ learned what to do and what _not_ to do, myself. And since I made all those mistakes on my own, I won't ever forget themâ€"which makes me a better smith than I ever would be if I'd just memorizing a bunch of things."

I glanced at Astrid, finding her brows knit together. "I guess what I'm saying is, in the Ring, don't be afraid to be imaginative. Put your own spin on thingsâ€"y-your dad taught you how to fight, right?"

She straightened, proud, and nodded. "Honor that by using his moves, but uhâ€¦ come up with your own, too. What just _appears_ to you while you're out there could be better than anything any elder can tell you. _Listen,_ to the old generations, but remember that sometimes your instincts know you and the situation better than they ever could. And once you have your own moves, you can practice those."

Astrid was quiet for a second. "So in forging, you listen to Gobber, _and_ found your own way of doing things by trial and error. Built your own set of ideas." I nodded, glad she was getting it. She held up the ball bearing. "Like this thing?"

I smiled brightly. "Part of my own design. It fits into a socketâ€"here, like this." I took one of the spare rods with one of the balls welded onto it and showed her the smoothly-rounded end before slipping it into a spare socket and moving it around. "And now, a good 120 degrees of free motion."

"Why would you need that?"

"Well, that's where the second part of the imagination comes in," I explained, struggling to find a metaphor she would really get. "Umâ€¦ When you're fighting a battle, you have individual moves you use on the field and the overall strategy, right?" She noddedâ€"it was rare that individual Vikings used something as complicated as _strategy_, but it wasn't unheard of. In all-out war, it was almost common. "The ball bearing, in this case, is like, I dunno, an axe swing. But if you combine it with a bunch of othersâ€¦"

"You can get something like that." Astrid pointed to my schematic on the wall, and flicked a glance to the corner. "You never told me what that thing was, by the way."

My mind scrambled. "It's â€"uhâ€"a sail!" I explained, hoping my stuttering wasn't too suspicious. "A new kind of sail, that folds up easier. Means smaller ships, which-which are good for, ya'know. Stealth."

"Hm." I wasn't surprised that she wasn't too impressedâ€"stealth wasn't really the Viking way. Building a more efficient rostrum for hurtling headfirst into battle would've probably gotten a better

reaction. "Weird looking sail. Kinda tiny too."

"That's just for the test run," I invented, happy she was at least mostly buying it. "The real one is gonna be, uh, bigger."

I hoped it wouldn't have to be—"this fin took hours, and if I'd gotten the measurements wrong, I'd have to start over almost from scratch.

Astrid gave the fin drawing one more look over. "So—come up with my own moves. Practice that. That's what you're saying?"

I shrugged. "That's what I've done in the forge. Seemed to work okay enough." I hesitated, then picked the actual fin back up, holding it out.

She took it and opened it, watching it slide smoothly, open and closed. She held it out to hand back to me, and I have no idea what possessed me to say "One more thing."

Astrid raised an eyebrow, but was listening, still holding onto the fin. "You, uh—when you're in the Ring," I started, shaky and still not knowing why in Hel's name I was risking my life to say this, but remembering our first day and an extra hole in a fire brigade formation, "you act like it's every man—woman, whatever—for himself?"

"Yeah?" she asked, shaking her head in confusion.

"Um." I put my hands together, rubbing nervously before pointing the connected fingers at her. "Maybe—don't? Act like that? I mean—work with everyone, as a team? Instead of—of letting everyone else take hits or-or g-getting out of the way maybe just—maybe help the others out too?"

Astrid's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Hiccup, I don't know where you've been going, but dragon-training in the Kill Ring is a competition. And that means everyone for themselves—if you can't handle the heat, get out of the forge."

She threw the fin back into my arms, nearly throwing me onto my rear. She spun around, but didn't leave—took a deep breath.

"I'll take the other thing under consideration," she said firmly, which was about as much of an apology as I was getting, I guessed.

"O-Okay. Anytime you want to-to talk more— I'll be here."

Astrid started to leave. At the door, though, she hesitated and turned around, opening her mouth once before speaking again. "I—think I understand why you're always going after the Night Fury," she said, almost reluctantly.

The words made me blink. "You, uh, you do?"

A light in her eyes turned fierce. "The same reason I'm going after the Flightmare. To prove myself, and honor our families, right?"

Everyone knew the story of Frozen Finn Hoffersonâ€”once Fearless Finn Hofferson, Astrid's uncleâ€”and how he'd gone to face the legendary Flightmare alone, only to freeze at the very sight of it. It was the biggest stain on the Hofferson name to date, that I knew of, and I knew Astrid took it very personally.

And even though I nodded to her, smiling tightly as she turned away, I didn't think we were that similar; at least, not anymore. She wanted to clear her family's name of any cowardice by killing the thing, but me? After safely tucking the most deadly and feared dragon away in a cove, after speaking to it and almost befriending it?

Those weren't the actions of someone looking to prove themselves as a dragon-killing Viking, to their family or anything else.

I didn't know what I was doing anymore.

My hand fell onto the fin, and my jaw clenched. _Maybe I don't know what my big goals are now_, I thought, _but I've still got to fix what I did wrong then._

I grabbed the fin and headed out the door, towards the cove. Hopefully, this would work.

* * *

><p>* Thor is not an intelligent individual. He's big, brawny, kind-hearted... but rather stupid. In fact, in literature, there's a character trope called der reign Thor, which is defined as a dim but very well-meaning character; Perceval from _Perceval and the Holy Grail_ is one such character. The joke being made here is that Hiccup, while clever and ingenious and intelligent as always, is a little too shocked to immediately grasp what's happening, and therefore comes across as a little more under-witted than normal.

Hope you liked this chapter! I like adding the Astrid scenes with Hiccup; their romance was a little too fast for me in the movie, so I'm hoping to add a little dimension to it. It's going to be _fun_, because I've never written or experienced romance before, so I'm kinda flying by the seat of my pants here. If you see anything way too OOC (that can't be explained by the changes I've made to this universe) or that just doesn't work romance-wise, please please review or message me and let me know!

(Fixed from "Frightmare" to "Flightmare", courtesy of PrincessArien.)

A thank you,

PEACE,

~Tibki

7. Chapter 7

Hey y'all!

****Shortie today, unfortunately. But hopefully still good!****

****Also: feel free to ask any questions about the story. If I think that it's something everyone needs to know, I'll post the answers in an author's note alongside the note you'll get yourself.****

****Also twice: Thanks to PrincessArien for pointing out that it's _Flightmare_ and not _Frightmare_, which is what I wrote in Ch. 6, or _Brightmare_, which is what I accidentally put in the PM back to her. Both are cool and would work, but technically aren't correct, so I fixed it. Cookies to you, my friend!****

****DISCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER SEVEN</p></h2>

It was Washing Day, so what would've been a morning training was put off until afternoon to allow the village time for their weekly baths in the ponds and streams around Berkâ€"Gobber, who only _sometimes_ kept the Washing Day custom to begin with, was too lazy to keep up with dates and made the announcement that instead of bothering to change from morning to afternoon every seven days, training would just be held in the afternoon from now on.

The others weren't too happy about thatâ€"they'd figured that after getting bored with keeping up, Gobber'd let them put off the baths in the frigid waters and give them a chance to soak in the warmer afternoon times. Me, I didn't care.

Since I couldn't swim, I always had to take my own bath in the house, using a bucket and a few ragsâ€"even without the cold, I never felt more thankful for that than today. Taking a bath alone meant that I could rush through it and get over to Toothless with the fin more quickly than I would've been able to if I'd gone with the group.

With everyone in the village gone into the Southern forest, where the water was slightly warmer (read: not half-frozen slush), I felt comfortable enough running North at almost full speed once I'd left the houseâ€"and plenty comfortable enough sneaking something from the storehouse.

Mulch and Bucket had returned from an overnight fishing trip this morning with a boat nearly sinking with different kinds of fish. They'd been hailed as heroes, and for once, Berk's outlook concerning food didn't seem so bleak.

A basketful of different kinds of fish wouldn't be missed _too_ badly.

One five-minute walk out of the borders of the village and one half-second run to the other side of the island later, I was in the cove.

"Oh _Tooth_less!_" I called out, throwing the bag of fish over the shieldâ€"still stuck where I'd left itâ€"and ducking underneath the thing. "You in here?"

"W**here _else_ would I be, exactly" an exasperated growl returned, as the dragon slunk out of the shadows. ***"A**nd why are you still calling me that ridiculous***" His nostrils flared and his eyes widened, though, the moment he saw the basket on my back. ***"W**ait. Is that***"

I grinned. "I brought breakfast!" Though the run had been quick and easy, the weight of the fish on my back had left me winded. "Hope**| you're hungry**," I said, panting and testing the transition between Norse and Dragonese by slipping into the latter mid-sentence.

Smiling at the smooth change, I dumped the basket and kicked it over, letting the fish spill out onto the grass with a wet _slip_. The sound made me shudder. ***"U**rgh, that's disgusting**."***

"Y**ou obviously have no taste**," Toothless returned, coming forward to nose at the assortment of fish.

Rolling my eyes, I ignored that in favor of more**| covert endeavors. Slowly, I backed around his side, talking as I went to distract him. ***"S**o, I got you some salmon, and some nice Icelandic cod***" He snapped a few fish up, making content purrs in the back of his throat. ***"A**nd a whole smoked eel***!"***

"_**W**hat_***"*** Toothless reared back, his eyes narrowing. ***"I**t reeks***!"*** he growled, teeth bared.

A little confused, I picked up the yellow and black animal. Toothless backed away, fear entering his eyes. ***"G**et that _away_ from me***!"*** he roared.

"N**o! No, no, no! Okay then!"*** I quickly threw it to the side and held out a hand to calm him. He sniffed my palm and shuddered, so I wiped it on my coat. ***"Y**eah, I don't really like eel much either**."***

"I** can't believe you _touched_ the evil thing**," Toothless muttered, before turning back to the pile of fish.

I waited until he'd started eating again before moving once more, carefully circling around him again. ***"Y**ou just enjoy that, I'll be back here***" I dropped back into Norse, "minding my own business**|"

There was a distinct huff and a mutter of ***"***_**S**quishes_***,"*** but I paid it no attention. I crept over to his tail and laid the new fin out next to it, reaching to tie it on**| "only for the thing to move out of my reach.

I grunted and dove for it, but it ducked out of the way again. "Just**|hold**|still!" I muttered, chasing after the thing and sending a glare at the oblivious dragon. Finally, I wrapped my legs around the appendage, getting it still enough to start tying the prosthetic on the end.

The buckle on the base, then the buckle on the tip and the few sliders in between to keep it steady**| "I didn't notice how all movement stopped after a minute, but appreciated it when his other fin stretched wide, letting me open the other one to compare.

"Not too bad," I said, happy. The size was right, despite me having to guess the dimensions. "A couple tweaks, maybe make it broader andâ€"whoa!_"

Suddenly the ground was retreating from under my feet, more and more air between me and it. The only support against gravity was between my legs and I squeezed hard because holy Frejya it was a long way down. ******_**W**hooooooooaaahhâ€"Toothless_**!"**** I shrieked. ****N**o, no, no, stop this**!"****

We had to be a hundred feet in the airâ€"and with a twist of my gut, I felt us go from aiming up to going down. We were going to crash!

The tailfin!

It was right in front of meâ€"the fake part pushed flat by the wind, the real one wide. Thinking fast, I grabbed the side of the prosthetic and yanked it out, letting it catch air.

The ground was inches away from my face before we swooped back up.

Toothless roared into the sky, and he wasn't the only one. ****Y**ES! FINALLY**!"****

******_**I**T'S WORKING_**!"****I screamed, full of happiness and sheer terror at our height, and the words came out as one of the shrieking roars that had so often nearly deafened me before I met Toothless. I twisted the fin, nearly putting myself headfirst towards the ground, and we turned in the airâ€"I was given a few seconds' glimpse of the beautiful island below before we were swooping back low over the waters of the cove.

****Y**ES! YES, I DID IT**!"**** I shouted, exhilarated. Gods, this was amazing! I'd always imagined running would be a little like flying, but this wasâ€"!

****W**hat in fire's name are you doing on my tail**?"****

I'd barely had time to glance back before my seatâ€"Toothless's tailâ€"bucked, sending me flying through the airâ€"|

â€|and into the lake.

My back hit the water hardâ€"it almost felt like hitting solid ground, and it knocked the wind out of me. To make things worse, the crash of the water into my ears sent pure panic into my heart and I yelled out, bubbles flying from my mouth.

I can't swim!

I clamped my mouth shut the moment I saw I was about to lose more air and started frantically pumping my arms and legsâ€"to no avail. The liquid around me was heavy like sap, dragging my limbs down like air never did, and I started sinking.

No, no no noâ€"_"

The lights of the surface got farther and farther away and I moved faster, knowing it was useless but gods-dam# I didn't want to drâ€

Oh gods, oh _gods_â€I was going to drown!

Terror kicked in. I screamed and more air escaped, this time replacing itself with thick, viscous water. Pain erupted in my chest and I slammed my mouth closed again, still reaching desperately for the surface. My vision started blackening at the edges.

I'm going to die, I realized, my last thoughts fuzzy as my vision, the pain, and finally the world faded into nothing.

Oh gods I'm gonna d

* * *

><p>When he flicked the annoying Squish off his tail, Tooâ€the Night Fury, felt something in his flight pattern change.

The Night Fury was a creature of the skyâ€a prince among dragons, regal and strong and maybe even more at home in the air than on the ground. It was a Gift, passed down from Thor, he who had made his wings so broad to harness the wind, and who ruled the heavens.

Flying was instinctual to the Night Furyâ€when he'd first been constructed of lightning and Hel's rattling, shrieking breath, he'd been thrown into the gales of the thunderstorm and flew immediately. He'd _learned_ to walk, later, and spent all other timeâ€not to mention a great majority of time even after learning what the odd appendages on his chest were forâ€among the clouds, under the watchful gazes of Gmot and the burning stars.

He _knew_ flightâ€how each of his wings had to tilt to meet the winds, how every twitch of his body could lead to an ascent or a dive, to a roll to the left or to a terrifying stall.

Which was why he knew, the moment the Squish had fallen off, that something was wrong.

The balance of air was off, the way it had been for the past few daysâ€it was flowing too freely past his left side, untethered by the tailfin he knew was gone. He bent at his middle to look back and saw his tail, wide on the right and flat on the left.

N**o!*** he screamed. Whatever miracle had been granted him to allow him flight once more had been ripped away, and he felt himself drop.

At least it was a soft landing, in the water. The splash he made was enormous.

The Night Fury pulled through the surface with a frustrated growl, kicking with his hind legs and paws and swishing his tail to keep upright in the deeper end of the lake. Irrked at the whole situation and more than a little annoyed at the Squishâ€no doubt this was _his_ faultâ€he swam to shore and pulled himself up onto land, shaking himself off to get most of the water off.

T**his'll take forever to dry**, he grumbled, feeling his annoyance rise a little higher. Normally, he didn't mind much about getting wet, but that on top of having the skies ripped away from his claws yet again?

He made the mistake of sparing a glance upwards, and a ripping at his heart was his punishment. The blue was soft and the white was puffed, and he would guess that there were some lovely thermals to glide around inâ€”the last of the year, no doubt. And he was missing them. Would miss them, every year, from now on. For the rest of his life.

Because he was grounded.

Those few, precious moments back in the air, even as uncontrolled as he'd been, had been the best of his life. The relief and joy sang through his veins as the air brushed over his scales like an old friend. It had been an experience he had been both glad and foolish to think he would get to enjoy for as long as he breathed. It outmatched the entire days spent flying before that gods-forgotten night, because it had presented itself as freedom from squish-chains he'd only just donned.

And now, they'd been slapped back on. His home had been stripped away from him again. He was flightless.

There was no worse word in Dragonese than flightless. It meant death, but more importantly, it meant that one of the few things that removed their noble race from the snakes that crawled in the dirt had been taken away. A flightless dragon was as good as dead when squishes were around, worthless at all other times.

He never thought he'd be one of those dreaded, pitied number. The Night Fury had never expected to fall so hard from his throne in the sky. Flight was more than life; flight was dignity and strength, flight was the magic and power of the gods.

Flight was all he'd had to keep him going under that parasite's spell.

It was everything a dragon embodiedâ€”everything just he wasn't anymore.

He shook off the thoughtsâ€”no good keeping them rattling around his head when there was no changing themâ€”and instead focused on something else: the Squish. Hiccup.

This was his fault.

A**nd what in Niflheim was that all aboutâ€”?*** he roared, spinning around to face the boy.

Except the boy wasn't there.

The distinct lack of Squish anywhere made him pause. Had he gone back to the Squish Nest, after he'd thrown him off his tail? It wasn't likelyâ€”he didn't think most squishes could move that fast, and though he knew this Squish could, he didn't peg Hiccup as one rude enough to leave without a farewellâ€”or at least a snarky

comment about his sudden landing.

***"W**hat theâ€|**?"** Where had he gone? Squishes didn't just _disappear_â€"sure, sometimes they became hard to find or ducked into those ridiculously shaped nests, but vanish into thin air?

The Night Fury sniffed the airâ€"having just had the Squish dragged through it, his strange scent was fresh and led him straight back to the shore.

Was the Squish swimming?

The Night Fury walked over to the shore by the slightly shallower endâ€"still twice deeper than the Squish stoodâ€"where he'd dropped him, annoyance growing once more. The foolish Squish thought it fun to _play_ in the water while he was stuck there, on the ground, _unable to fly_? Because of _him_? He growled and looked into the water, scanning for the foolish faâ€"

Eyes closed. Mouth open. Motionless on the silty bottom.

His heart stuttered for a moment, and then the irritation flared back up.

***"S**tupid Squish! You're not scaring me like that! Get out here and explain what in Helheim you thought you were doing**!"**

The Squish didn't reply. He didn't even move. The Night Fury glared down at him, unimpressed, until he saw the scrawny limbs in the dirt by his side.

He'd been on raids with the other dragonsâ€"never stealing food, he wasn't that far under the disgusting parasite's controlâ€"but he'd seen squishes fighting on boats and on the land by the seas, and he _knew_ they could swim. He _knew_ that when they fell into water, even if their chests sank, their limbs would float.

This Squish's limbs were not floating.

Hiccup was not swimming.

Realization and terror hit him like a stone from one of his old squish targets. Fast as the lightning that had created him, Toothless leapt screaming into the water, splashing wide and nearly losing sight of him for a terrifying moment before he saw a glimpse of red fur.

He snapped his head underwater, grabbed a mouthful of that wonderfully visible, ridiculous false coat, and, teeth extending for a better grip, he heaved upwards. They both broke the surface and Toothless dragged him to the shore, breathing heavily through his nostrils and heart pounding in fear.

_Please don't be dead, please don't be dead_â€"

How, _how_ could he have been so _stupid_? Squishes were fragile without their fake claws and scales, more fragile than any dragon and the hatchlings even more soâ€"throwing him from that height might've killed him; hitting the water and not being able to swim? Dead in heartbeats! How could he have not realized that? And he'd stood there

on the shore, angry at his only aerie for _nothing_ while he'd
drowned!

Terrified, Toothless laid him out on the ground. ***O**h Thor, please
don't let him be deadâ€"please be alive, pleaseâ€"Squish**!"** The
thin chest wasn't moving, and the eyes were closed. No
response.

Horror wrapped around Toothless's heart like an icy storm.
***N**oâ€"no, Hiccup! Hiccup! _Cousin_! Talk to me! Cousin,
breathe**!******

With a roar, he slammed one of his paws down on Hiccup's chest,
frantic.

"_DOH!_"_

The explosion of sound and waterâ€"even if it was spat right into his
faceâ€"was one of the greatest things Toothless had ever felt or
heard.

Hiccup hacked for breath, his chest heaving and spasming, more water
spilling from his lips every moment. Toothless stepped back, giving
him space and air as the young Squish turned to his side, more clear
liquid and then some vile, green-and-brown stuff exploding from his
mouth.

It was one of the most disgusting things he'd ever seen squishes do,
but it was lovely because his chest was _moving_ and he was _alive_.
Relief settled deep into his bones.

Hiccup muttered something in the squish language, which Toothless
didn't catch, but his tone was relieved, so it wasn't hard to guess
what it was, and Toothless shared the emotion. For about thirty
seconds.

By the time the Squish had flipped back onto his back, the anger had
returned.

****_**W**hat by Yggdrasil's great branches and roots was
that**?*_*_*" **the Night Fury screamed, his roar echoing several
times against the cove's walls.

The Squish flinched at his volume, covered his ears, but once he was
done, he looked up again. He looked sheepish and the Night Fury felt
something very akin to his own name boiling in his gut.

***U**hâ€| sorry**."** The words were a soft croon and a few
whimpers, truly apologetic. The Night Fury wasn't feeling too
forgiving. ***I** just wanted to see what would happen with your tail
if I**â€"***

The Night Fury roared in his face, furious, and startled him into
silence. Who _cared_ about his little hitchhike on his tail? ***N**ot
about _that_ you flaming _idiot_! Why didn't you tell me you can't
rotting SWIM**?"**

The Squish blinked, looking confused but not, for some reason, scared
of him. ***U**hâ€| what**?*_*_* he asked. ***W**hat're youâ€| oh**."**
Slow realization dawned in those small, forest-green eyes.

***Y**ouâ€"you saved me**?"**

****_**I** shouldn't have had to**!**_**** he shrieked. ***Y**ou, like a _fool_, never told me you couldn't swim**!"**

***W**haâ€"itâ€"it never came up**!"**

***Y**ou still should've said something**!"**

Annoyance crossed the Squish's features. ***W**hen**?"** he snapped. ***I** met you _yesterday_. What, was I supposed to just go up to you while you were still wrapped up in the bolas and, and go _Ohâ€"oh _hi_ big scary dragon, I'm Hiccup, son of Stoick, _Ã•smegir _of Thorâ€"fire acts like I'm the best friend it hasn't seen in ages whenever I walk by but I swim like a stone _ship**!"**

***I**f necessary, _YES_**!"** the Night Fury thundered, the roar long and loud. ***Y**ou nearly _died_ you stupid Squish, and you're the only aerie I've got, so _yes_ you should've said _something_**!"**

He expected him to shout back but instead what he got wasâ€"silence. The Night Fury blinked at the soft, thoughtful expression suddenly on the Squish's face, thrown off step by the lack of anger there.

***W**hat do you mean by 'aerie**?"** the Squish asked, his voice curious. ***A**ndâ€"and just now. Did you call meâ€"| _cousin_**?"**

â€"|_Dam#._ He had. The Night Fury grumbled and turned away. ***I**t's not important**."**

The ridiculous shreds of fur on his face met. ***A**re you sure? Because it certainly sounded like it was**."** The Night Fury didn't answer. ***L**ook, thanks for saving my life. Really. But c'monâ€"who'm I gonna tell**?"**

The Night Fury sighed and rolled his eyes to the heavens. ***A**n aerie isâ€"| dam and sire, and hatchlings. Your nestmates and others like you, and your own mate**, " he told the blue sky.

***A** family**."**

The word was strange, odd in translation. ***I**f that's the squish word for it**."**

***B**utâ€"| but then why'm _I_ in your aerie**?"** he asked, not understanding. ***I** can't be your cousin, I'm not a dragon**."**

The Night Fury snorted. ***G**ood thing too, you'd be the scrawniest hatchling I'd ever seen**."**

***H**ey**!"**

The Squish sounded more amused than truly offended, so the Night Fury sighed and glanced back at him. ***L**ook. Your grandfather is Thor, right**?"** The Squish cringed for some odd reason, but nodded.

***A**ndâ€| _how_ exactly does your kind refer to mine**?"**

***W**hat, Night Furies**?"** He nodded. ***U**h, we call you guys the 'unholy offspring of liâ€| _lightning _and death itself**!"**

His eyes grew wide as he made the connection, and the Night Fury almost smirked. Maybe this Squish _wasn't_ as stupid as the others. ***Y**ou're Thor's _kid!_ Withâ€"with Hel**?"**

The Night Fury shook his head. ***N**ot exactly. Night Furies are made when a thunderstorm hits a house that has seen deathâ€"Thor and Hel meet, and change a bolt of lightning into one of us. I don't have a direct lineage, and there are no Night Fury eggs. But I'm of his make**."**

Thoughts were working fast in the Squish's mind, he could see them. The Night Fury had to hide his grin. Definitely not as stupid as his kin. ***S**oâ€| so since _I'm_ his grandson, and _you're_ his sonâ€"effectivelyâ€"then we'reâ€| you're myâ€| _uncle_**?"**

Both dragon and boy shared a look.

**F**amily**, the Night Fury said, grimacing further at the taste of the squish word. ***C**ousin sounds better, or aerie. It's also probably why you can understand and speak to me**."**

A**nother Gift**, the Squish realized. The Night Fury shruggedâ€"he wasn't too surprised that the Squish had some idea of what his heritage entailed. He'd already seen him runâ€"faster than a vain Spine-Shooter to a reflecting ice sheet!â€"and, from the sound of things, some affinity with fire balanced out his inability to swim. ***W**hoa. Waitâ€"does that mean I _can't_ talk to other dragons? Since the only reason I can talk to you is because we'reâ€| family**?"**

That, he didn't know the answer to. ***T**he only way to find out, I guess, would be to try and speak with another dragon**,*** he offered. ***B**ut good luck holding one down long enough to try, you Squishy hatchling**."**

The Night Fury didn't really notice, but the Squish grew quiet after that.

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it!
**

Remember to ask any questions you have, and I'll try and clear everything up. :)

PEACE,

~Tibki

****Hey y'all!****

****You ready for the next installment?****

****DISCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER EIGHT_

I didn't tell Toothless then and there about dragon training.

I don't know why. Maybe I couldn't fess up to it, the two-facedness of battling dragons during the day and befriending one at night. But it wasn't like I really wanted to be in dragon trainingâ€”my dad had forced me into it! It wasn't my fault if it wasn't my decisionâ€”right?

Besides, at least this way, I had an opportunity to test out my new theories.

Yupâ€”theories, plural. Let's just say the question about whether or not I could speak to other dragons? Wasn't the only thing I carried out of the cove that same afternoon.

However, neither were those the only things I walked into the Kill Ring with. Meeting up at the closed gate, we were each given a bucket full of water before we were allowed down the ramp onto the main floor. The others lifted them easilyâ€”as the fire brigade, it was their job to carry these things around. I needed to switch to both hands every few minutes, or risk having to put it down for a rest.

(I hadn't gone to sleep at all last night, making Toothless's fin, and I could feel exhaustion on the horizon. I knew from experience it wouldn't go away, with the exception of when I was running, until I got enough sleep to make up for it. Until then, I only prayed to Baldr that there wouldn't be so much (normal) running this training session.)

Gobber was, this time, back on the floor, but the group stuck together in a more defensible position this time anyway. We'd learned from last lesson, apparently. "Alrigh' everyone, pair up! Find yerself a buddy an' stick with him!"

Snotlout puffed his chest out and looked to Astrid, obviously expecting her to choose him. She didn't even give him a glance, and instead traded shrugs with Ruffnut before joining her. Tuffnut walked over to Snotlout, smirking at the gobsmacked and insulted expression on his face.

I guess that left me with Fishlegs. I looked up and smiled at the larger boy and, surprisingly, received one back. "I wonder which dragon we'll see today," he said, sounding excited.

"Well, knowing Gobber, it's not the Gronkle or Nadder," I said. "He likes to keep thingsâ€”interesting." Entertaining and amusing, both only to him, were other ways to put it.

"Yeah." I watched as Gobber walked over to the lever that opened the

two-doored cage. "Um, hey, Hiccup? Can I talk to you realâ€"

I didn't even have time to acknowledge him before the doors blew open in a small explosion of burning yellow gas.

Immense rolls of sickly green fog spilled out almost like water, quickly filling the air and obscuring everything from sight.

Instinctively, I moved closer to Fishlegs and felt him do the same, his sentence falling away from both of our minds. There was no doubt that the dragon was somewhere in here, looking for any of us to take as a nice snack.

"T'day is about teamwork!" Gobber's voice called from somewhere inside the green shroud. Well, this at least explained why he wasn't above us watchingâ€"no entertainment in watching a big green cloud letting out intermittent screams of terror and death. Then I smelled the stuff and, after gagging, wondered how insane he had to be to not move up there anyway.

"Oh, gods!" I said, using the hand that wasn't struggling to hold up the heavy bucket to pull my collar over my nose. The thin fabric of my shirt didn't help a lot. "That stinks!"

"Really?" Fishlegs asked, sniffing. I sent him an incredulous lookâ€"it smelled like rotten fish and spoiled yak milk!â€"but he shrugged. "I don't smell anything."

"Now," Gobber cut in, still teaching despite the horrible air around us. I cringed but made myself breathe steadily. If everyone else could handle it, so could I. "A wet dragon head can't light its fire! The Hideous Zippleback is extra tricky. One head breathes gas, the other head lights itâ€"yer job is to know which is which!"

And pray to the gods our partner could get to the other head if we pick wrong, I guessed. There were already little gurgles coming through the smokeâ€"nothing I could understand, yet, but enough to send chills down my spine because holy crap_, something was in there_.

Fishlegs behind me didn't seem much better off than I was; he had tensed as all visibility dropped to nothing and had started muttering. "Razor sharp serrated teeth that inject venom for pre-digestionâ€" What? Pre-digestion? "Prefers an ambush attack, crushing it's victimsâ€"

My heart was already going three times its normal speed (which was saying something for a guy who could run faster than some dragons could fly) I didn't need him helping. "Would you please stop that?" I hissed, glad it came out in Norse.

Somewhere in the vomit-green, the dragon gurgledâ€"my ears twitched, straining; it was like someone was muttering something just under their breath, just barely incomprehensible, but the sounds were at full volume.

(A bit like the time Tuffnut got hold of his first ale; the gibberish had technically been Norse, and he'd been screaming it, but it was

too slurred to understand. Ruffnut was the only one who'd been able to translate: something about the minimum velocity a yak had to have while being punted off a cliff for it to never hit the water, and whether or not he could be used as a secondary test subject.)

((The twins get _weird_ when they're drunk.))*

Elsewhere in the arena, I heard Snotlout boast to Tuffnutâ€”the two of whom then deftly splashed both of the girls with their buckets of water. "Hey!" Ruffnut shouted, angry as usual. "It's us, _idiots_!"

"Your butts are getting bigger," Tuffnut replied, unsurprisingly not sounding at all apologetic, wherever he was. "We thought you were a dragon!"

"Not that there's anything wrong with a _dragon-esque_ figâ€”ah!"

No doubt my cousin earned himself a punch for that one, and the cry quickly following it had to have come from Tuffnut. I glanced up at Fishlegs, wondering how he was reacting.

He still looked scared, but a bit exasperated now too. "They always _do_ that," he whispered. "They're gonna let it know where we are!"

No sooner had he said it than Tuffnut screamed againâ€”this one different from the shouts of someone getting pummeled by their twin. I lifted up the bucket, looking around, and felt my heart stutter as two feminine shouts joined his.

"Oh! Ooooh I'm hurt!" We had to duck out of the way fast to avoid Tuffnut sprinting by us for the exit. "I am very much hurt!"

I swallowed, nervous. The dragon's growls continued, even as the gas began dispersing slowly into the air, and Fishlegs didn't look better off than I was. "Chances of survival dwindling into single digits nowâ€”|"

Suddenlyâ€”there it was!

One of its headsâ€”a yellow-eyed green bulb, with one sharp nosehorn and a trail of red spines down its thin, long neckâ€”swerved out of the smoke, moving snakelike through the air. I hesitatedâ€”would something smart enough to set up a trap like this, maybe almost as smart as _Toothless_, really send out the sparking head first? Wouldn't it have one more trick left up itsâ€”| scales?

Nostrils flared as it stretched closer to Fishlegs, who danced back before throwing the water onto it anyway. It gave off a burbling cackleâ€”definitely a laugh, I could tell even without understanding itâ€”gas spilling out from the sides of its mouth.

"Oh," Fishlegs realized, voice soft with shock on the horizon. "Wrong head."

The head reared back and shrieked, spitting the flammable gas onto him. "Fishlegs!" Gobber yelled, sounding worried.

Luckily, though his guessing skills were dismal, Fishlegs's survival

instinct was a little betterâ€”he ran for it, making it up the ramp and out of the arenaâ€”

and turning the dragon's attention onto me.

The other head showed up, an almost exact copy that jolted as it jerked its jaws to create sparks. I could see the whole dragon nowâ€”and though it was intimidating and scary, something about it rubbed me the wrong way. Its scales were green and red, but not as brilliant as I'd expected, after seeing so many of these things attacking in the night. The legs were bent oddly from its squat body, and the heads were kept low, almost close enough for me to touchâ€”

"Now Hicca!" Gobber yelled.

Right, try it the Viking way first. I threw the bucket upwards, aiming for the head Fishlegs hadn'tâ€”and the water fell back to earth, never having come near it even despite it's crouched height.

"Aw, c'mon!" I complained. _Why_ did the Viking way never work for me?

The Zippleback's sparking head roared and the whole dragon charged. A pair of jointless wings spread wide and fanned to make it seem bigger, and though I fell back in retreat I couldn't help but think of Toothless, making himself intimidating with his own wings.

Toothlessâ€”my theories!

"HICCUP!

I ignored Gobber's shout and narrowed my eyes, getting back to my feet. Almost on instinct, I bared my teeth and growled, low in my throat so that the others, so far away, probably wouldn't hear me.

*****_**B**ack off**!**_*****

The Zippleback froze.

Well, that worked. Time for part two. When I discreetly opened my jacket a little, showing off the color inside, true _fear_ entered its eyes.

It scrambled away, back towards its den. I followed, herding it. "Back!" I called, back in Norse for the others to hear. "Back! Nowâ€”uhâ€”now d-don't you make me tell you again!"

It was workingâ€”the dragon was almost past the doors! "That's right! Backâ€”back, into your cage!"

I glanced around, making sure I would be unnoticed before I grabbed the eel from underneath my coat. "Now think about what you've done," I said as I threw it into the space with them.

The dragon put itself into a corner rather than go anywhere near the thing, giving me an opportunity to heave the massive iron doors shut.

When I turned around, the entire group was staring at me.

"â€|heh," I squeaked, suddenly self-conscious. Fishlegs dropped his bucketâ€"there was shock painted across every one of their faces. Even Gobber looked at me like I had suddenly become a different personâ€"or maybe sprouted a second, Zippleback head.

"Okay! So, uh, are we done?" No answer. "Cuz, I've got some things I've got to, uhâ€| yup, so seeâ€"see you tomorrow!"

And with that, I booked it out of the Ring. Running normally, I wasn't, however, fast enough to miss Snotlout swearing, or Gobber laughing uproariously in what sounded like joy. The sound made me smile.

* * *

><p>The moment everyone else had abandoned the Ring, I went back.<p>

Something about the Zippleback had stuck in my conscienceâ€"maybe the fear that had been in its gaze when I closed the doors, maybe the way it had so suddenly frozen when I'd growled at it, or maybe I just wanted more proof that it was me who couldn't understand it, and not that it was just deaf or something.

Whatever it was, it brought me back to the Ring, once I was sure I'd be alone. It took all of my strength to prop open the gate enough for me to slip in, but I managed it.

The sun was setting by now and well below the angle it had to be to light the Ring floor. Luckily, for times like this, there were always a few torches left by the ramp. I grabbed one and pulled out a strike-a-light from my coat. I'd had the same one for agesâ€"where everyone else's would wear out with continuous usage, any time I made just one spark, something was bound to catch fire.

Sure enough, one strike and I had a roaring torch in hand.

The Ring was coldâ€"because despite the fact that it was still late July, in Berk, that meant winter's just below the horizon_ and the nights were going to start getting chilly. And in a huge construct of pure granite, mostly underground, with a ceiling open to drafts? Chilly meant cold.

I dropped the torch off in a bracket on the wall, letting it's light fill most of the floor. Feeling comfortable running at full speed here, where no one would see me and where the granite wouldn't let me leave tracks, I also toed off my shoes. The cool stone felt good against my toes and I stretched them with a happy groan, popping a few jointsâ€"they never really liked being confined in boots, but they'd fall off in the winter otherwise, and then where would I be?

Not being able to run was never an idea I let myself entertainâ€"just the slightest hint of the concept made me feel hollow inside, made my toes curl in horror.

Like they were nowâ€"and the best way to fix that was to run. A half-blink was all that was needed to zip over to the cages and the

whole thing was forgotten, especially since it took my entire weight to pull the Zippleback doors open.

The light didn't reach all the way into the cage, but with it now open, I could hear the terrified whimpers from the dark back. Guilt flooded through my system as I remembered how Toothless had reacted to that same eel.

I cleared my throat and dropped my pitch into Dragonese. **"H"**hey guys**"**.**"**The whimpering stopped, before suddenly becoming more frantic. **"W"**hoa! Whoa, I won't hurt you**"**! I said, stepping forward with my hands out.

The moving shadow that was probably the Zippleback didn't seem comforted, and instead reeled further away. **"Y"**ou can't understand me, can you**"**? I asked, the warble echoing a little in the cage.

Now that I thought about it, the place was a little small for such a big dragon—but then, it was a dragon. Vikings weren't exactly going to bother for creature comforts for the thing.

At least they didn't throw its worst fear into a small space with it.

The guilt was going to eat me apart for weeks at this rate, so I decided to act against it now. Moving fast, I ducked inside and grabbed the slimy, starting-to-rot corpse. The Zippleback screeched—maybe thinking I'd throw it at them again?—but froze in surprised silence when I instead hurled it in the other direction, out of sight.

I wiped my hands on my coat, just as I'd done with Toothless this morning. "Hey," I said, trying Norse this time. "Sorry about this afternoon. I promise, I won't hurt you, okay?"

Not entirely certain what I was hoping for—maybe forgiveness? Definitely to not get eaten—I took a careful step into the cage. The dragon shuffled anxiously but didn't seem to protest.

I held my hand out. "Just—give me a chance. Please."

For a minute, there was nothing.

Then, out of the shadows, came one of the heads, moving hesitantly before settling carefully into my palm.

I smiled and stepped forward, scratching lightly like Toothless had liked. The Zippleback head purred, and the other one appeared beside it, curious and wide-eyed. My other hand stretched out and it nudged into it.

"_"hey, you two—**"**whoa**"**! **"_"** That was not the Dragonese I was used to speaking! This was rougher, sounded different to my own ears. I jumped back, surprised, and broke contact with both heads.

They looked at me, squawking quietly. Like before, I only barely couldn't understand them—like someone was speaking a dialect of Norse just too different for me to pick up on. I frowned and

glanced at my hand, rubbing my fingers together before memory made realization come.

I'd only been able to really talk with Toothless _after_ he'd touched my palmâ€”maybe with dragons I wasn't technically related to, I had to _keep_ contact in order to communicate.

Only one way to test that._ I reached out again and the heads willingly met my hands. *****_**C**an you two understand me now**?**__****_***" **I asked in the new language suddenly available to me.

*****_****_**Y**es, kin of NÃ³tt's Prince**._**_*****_ Just like the language, their voice was rougher than Toothless', but there was another quality to it. I couldn't exactly place itâ€”but it sounded like something mixed with exhaustion.

The guilt returnedâ€”there was only one reason for their exhaustion that I could think of. *****_****_**I**â€”I'm sorry. About the eel**,**_****_**** I said, and both heads shuddered. *****_****_**R**eally, I am. Iâ€”I didn't know how to talk to you guys until literally just now, and I really needed you to get back in here. I promise, you won't have to deal with it anymore**. **_****_*****

*****_****_**Y**ou have our gratitude, Prince's kin**,**_*****_ one head said.

*****_****_**And our forgiveness**,**_***** the other added.

I smiled gratefully and scratched their heads in thanks, before frowning. *****_****_**M**y name's Hiccup**. **_*****

The Zippleback's heads reared back. _**"**_**Y**-youâ€”The kin of NÃ³tt's Princeâ€”**!**__*****_

"__**â€”want _us**_â€”_**_*****_

"__**â€”to call you _Hiccup_? As your _name**_?_**_*****_ the heads asked, both looking identically shocked.

What was with dragons and my name? Yeah, it wasn't the greatest but it wasn't _that_ bad. Grandmother Gothi could've named me Ug. Hiccup might mean _accident_, but I'll count my blessings and be happy with a family name.

And it was a whole lot better than _kin of NÃ³tt's Prince_, whatever that meant.

"__**U**hâ€”yeah**,**_****_**** I said, frowning. The Zippleback's heads exchanged glances, then pressed harder into my palms. I almost laughed, and scratched at their jaws happily.

"__**W**hy're you calling me that**?**__****_**** I asked, curious. **"_**_**K**in of __NÃ³tt's Prince**?**__****_****

Both heads blinked at me as one. _**"**_**Y**ou speak the language of our brother in fire**. **_*****_

"_****__**I** think squishes are still calling him the Dusk's Anger**,**__*****_ the other head put in.

Didâ€| he mean Night Fury? They knew that I had been speaking like Toothless? Then again, it did make sense; if I could only understand him normally, then that meant normally I could speak his language alone. Unless I was touching another dragon, I spoke like a Night Fury.

(By the way, NÃ³tt's Prince? _Not_ something I'd be calling that arrogant lizard.)

"___**Y**ou've been listening too long to the idiotic Stone-Swallower**,**__*****_ the other head suddenly told its partner. _**"**__**I**t's Darkness's Wrath**.**__*****_

*****_****__**N**o it's not! That's a stupid name for him**.**__*****_

"___**E**xactly why it fits; the _squishes_ are the ones who thought it up**.**__*****_

That was apparently a good point, because the other head seemed to nod thoughtfully. A little insulted on behalf of my entire species, I cut in. *****_****__**E**r, actually, its 'Night Fury'**.**__*****_*****

Both heads of the Zippleback traded glances. _**"**__**W**ell, I guess it could be worse**,**__*****_ the left head admitted.

I sighed and shook my head. *****_****__**L**ook**,**__*****_***** I said, licking my lips and glancing around. *****_****__**I** can't stay for long, butâ€| let me make up the eel thing to you**.**__*****_*****

The left head blinked. _**"**__**B**ut you already have our forgiveness, Pri__â€|I mean, Hiccup**.**__*****_

*****_****__**N**ow _that's_ a strange name**,**__*****_ the right head muttered.

They just couldn't drop it, could they? Did _every_ dragon feel the need to comment on my name? I shook it off. *****_****__**T**hen let me do it for my own conscience. I-I can't let you out of hereâ€|or make this place any bigger for you**â€|***__*****_***** I glanced around the cage. It was _definitely_ too small; the bent legs and necks I'd noticed earlier were from being crammed in somewhere they couldn't stretch out, I realized, with something almost like pity.

(Pity. For a dragon. If my dad saw me nowâ€|)

*****_****__**B**ut if there's anything else I can do to make up for it**â€|**__*****_*****

The two heads shared a glance, obviously thinking over it. Within a few seconds, they both looked at me simultaneously.

_**"**__**T**here is one thing, maybe**,**__*****_ the left head

admitted.

*****_****__**W**hat is it**?*_*_*_***_***** I asked, already determined to make it up to theseâ€| this? Dragon.

****I** need yak milk to make my gas**,**_**_ the other head explained, I assumed the gas-spitting one. _*****_**B**ut the squish who feeds us only gives us fish and old carcasses, with either no milk or the milk rotting inside of them**.**_*****_

That did explain why their gas smelled the way it did.

*****_****_**Y**ou want a fresh yak**?*_*_*_***_***** I asked, licking my lips in thought. *****_****_**T**hat might be hard to manageâ€the entire village is short on food because of the raids**.**_****_***** I wouldn't realize until much later how this news affected either dragonâ€how they stiffened and glanced at one another with wide eyes. *****_****_**B**ut I can definitely get you some fresh yak _milk_. Would that work**?*_*_*_***_*****

****Y**ES**!**_**_ the sparking head yelled, nearly startling me into letting him go. _*****_**T**hat would be _perfect_â€anything to get rid of that horrid _stench**!**_*****_

The other head grumbled. _*****_**I**t's not _my_ fault**!**_*****_

His partner snorted. _*****_**N**o, but it still reeks**.**_*****_

*****_****_**L**ess so than your breathâ€and _you_ don't even breathe gas! You just stink**!**_*****_

I smiled. Though maybe they were a little less violent (ironic as they were _fire-breathing reptiles_), they reminded me, a little, of a certain pair of twins from the village. *****_****_**I**'ll be back in a flash. Justâ€stay right here, okay**?*_*_*_***_*****

They both nodded in agreement and I stepped back, letting them go and almost feeling the knowledge of their language slip away. I nodded once to them before turning around and sprinting out of the Ring, only a vaguely brown blur for anyone to see.

A few seconds later, I was in the yak fields high in the mountain overlooking Berk with a pair of buckets. This part would take longer, but thankfully, even boy Vikings learned how to milk yaks at an early age.

After a few minutes spent filling each bucket, I ran back to the Ring, careful not to spill too much.

The Zippleback had come most of the way out of it's cage in the short time since I'd left, staying well away from the eel in the corner and the grate that held the Ring closed. They looked surprised to see me when I reappeared in the center of the Ring, but I only gave them a wide smile.

"Hope this isâ€| enough!" I said, pretty certain they'd get the idea of what I was saying even if I wasn't sure if they understood it.

Toothless seemed to understand me pretty well in Norse, but he struck me as a bit more intelligent than these guys. Straining under the weight now that I wasn't moving so fast, I put the buckets on the floor and stepped back.

With an eager almost _roar_, the dragon ran forward, the gassing head swooping down and grabbing the bucket with its teeth. It turned its head upward so that the bucket was upside down and spilling into its mouth, down its throat. The sparking head watched with a happy and relieved look in his eyes as his partner threw the first away and picked up the second.

I watched, a smile growing on my face. This seemed like a much better, happier dragon than the one I'd met in this same Ring just hours earlierâ€”all they'd needed was someone to listen to them, I guess.

The sparking head saw me and lowered its face so that I could touch it, obviously wanting to say something. **_"_**_**I** know I only complained about the stench, but you've really done us a favor, Prince's kin. My partner would not have been able to survive forever on such a diet**._**_**\""**_

Despite _knowing_ that dragons were meant to be killed, the idea of these guys dying of starvation in that tiny cell made my stomach churn in guilt and old memories of hunger. I was going to have to put them back inside, or else the village would freak.

*****_****_**I**'ll come by more often, then**, **_****_***** I swore, rubbing his head gently. Maybe I couldn't free them, but I could still help them. _**"**_**A**ndâ€”I'm sorry I didn't ask earlier, but what are you two's names**?*_**_****_*****

The sparking head looked at me oddly. _**"**_**N**ames are only between aeries, you know**.**_*****_ Suddenly he seemedâ€| sadder. _**"**_**I**t has been many moons since we've seen ours. We've forgotten our names**._**_**\""**_

There was no missing the grief in their eyes, and I found myself thinking about my dad, off hunting down the Dragon Nest, probably neck-deep in danger and death. Worry curled around my stomach and sympathy and sadness grew in my heart.

*****_****_**I**s it alright if I give you names? Just so I won't have to go around thinking 'Zippleback' all the time**?*_**_****_*****

The sparking head blinked at me, seeming surprised. _**"**_**Y**ouâ€| want to _name_ us**?*_**_**\""**_

I smiled hopefully. *****_****_**I**f you don't mind**?*_**_****_***** The head stared at me, and I took the silence as a 'yes'. *****_****_**W**ellâ€”how about Slither for you, and Tricky for your partnerâ€”because while he tricks people into thinking he's you, you slither through to ignite the gas**?*_**_****_*****

The dragon burst into what could only be a wide, fang-filled grin. _**"**_**P**artner**!**_**_**\""**_

He pulled out of my touch, leaving me to listen in confusion to

unintelligible hisses and growls as they talked. The gassing head reeled back in surprise, then nodded fiercely.

When they lowered their heads again, letting me touch their foreheads so that I could understand them, Slither and Tricky spoke as one, so their gratitude was said in a ringing unison. _**"**__**T**hank you, Hiccup the Kind Squish**.**__**\"**_

(The name, as embarrassing and un-frightening as it was, stuck.)

* * *

><p>And that's that!
**

Reference to Dreamworks' _Riders of Berk_ episode, _The Eel Effect_. The twins, when delirious in any form drunk or sick, actually get smarter. In the episode, they postulate and prove Galileo's theory involving a hammer and feather, about mass having no effect on the speed of falling objects; only air resistance matters. They also have the idea to expand their sample size by throwing Tuffnut and a yak off a cliff, and then they invent (ice cream) Ruff/Tuff Cream!

Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

~Tibki

9. Chapter 9

Hey y'all!

I went to Dublin Comic Con yesterday! It was the perfect end to a perfect last two days-I found a bone bead by my burial on site (Find of the Month, apparently); I got to play and have pictures of myself taken in partial medieval armor; I got to meet my FF penpal for the last like 5 years (hiya Yarn, if you're reading this!); I got to see a billion cool cosplays and meet Kevin Conroy, the voice of Batman! I did have to say goodbye to two friends (one from site and Yarn) but hopefully we'll find a way to stay in touch.

**Anyway. Long and important chapter today. Hope you like it!
:)**

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER NINE_

I spent the rest of the night in my shop, trying to think up ways of getting Toothless back in the airâ€”ways to make that prosthetic fin open and close like the real one. My first idea was a rope, but where would I tie the other end? His leg? He needed that for take off, and to land, and for clawing things that were hopefully fish and not people.

And besides, how would he be able to know how wide to spread it? I

had a feeling anything he knew about spreading and closing the thing was from instinctâ€”there was no doubt that the Night Fury belonged in the sky from birth. Not only that, he would need to glance back to see how wide the prosthetic was, and I doubted looking away was a smart idea while flying at about the speed of sound. Even more, how effective would the rope on the foot be? It seemed like an awkward set-up, not something Toothless would have the patience for for long.

I scrapped the rope-to-leg idea and focused on making a new one rather than poking more holes in it; that ship was already sunk.

The rope-to-mouth idea went even faster than the previous one. He needed his mouth open to shoot fire, and eat, and speak. A rope would force him to keep it closed (which was tempting if impractical), and turning his head to pull it would send him in every direction except ahead.

My third idea was to somehow access whatever part of the body let him control his old tailfin and connect that to the new oneâ€”but I tossed that almost as soon as I thought it up. Ridiculous.

But that did open up a pointâ€”there needed to be a mind, not another body part, behind the new fin. I couldn't figure out a way for Toothless to be that mind anymore, but maybe someone else could be that mind instead.

Two heads were better than one, they said. If he let me ride him, I'd be able to control the fins and he could fly again!

And, I privately thought, so could I. The little glimpse of beautiful island and gorgeous sky I'd gotten on my impromptu ride on his tail left meâ€”well. I certainly wasn't going to complain about a second chance to get up there.

(I'd always thought running was a bit like flying; I wasn't wrong, entirely, but flight was still something so much more amazingly different. I had to explore it more.)

The first thing I'd need was a saddle. My other cousins, the chiefs and their families of the tribes on the more southern islands in the Archipelago, had horses, and I'd seen people constructing saddles and tack during diplomatic trips I'd been allowed to attend.

"Can't be that different for a dragon than a horse," I figured, and got to work.

The forge was not a tanneryâ€”Berk didn't even have a main tannery, just a small stall where everyone did their own work or favors for friendsâ€”but even weapons needed leather bits, for handholds, decorations, fastenings. So while I didn't know my way around the pliable material like I did metal, I could maybe throw something together.

Toothless was sinewy, almost boneless, and I designed the saddle to echo thatâ€”instead of building a frame and making it stiff like I knew some saddles were made, I weaved together strips of the treated scrap leather that Gobber and I worked with, making it flexible and soft, and sewed each strip together with strong catgut. Between upper and bottom layers, I put some wool and plant fluffâ€”soft enough for

both of us, hopefully.

The buckles to keep it on him were a little harder to figure outâ€”mainly because I'd never seen them made for a horse and had to figure it out on my own. We have no horses up here; if we ever did, they were carried off by Nightmares long ago. Luckily, the kind of strap I'd used for his tail seemed to work just as fine as whatever the horsemen of the south had built. I used a wide and flat log from our uncut wood pile outside to model Toothless's back, and fit the straps onto it at the right angle.

It took most of the night, but when I was done, a sense of accomplishment I only got when I finished a good project settled deep into my bones. I damped down the forge and carried it home with a bright smile over my face.

Tomorrow was a break-day from training, giving me hours of free time. Toothless would love thisâ€¦

* * *

><p>"Oh Toothless!"

"I think I'm either going to learn to love or dread that sound**,"** the dragon said as he looked up from the rock he was sitting on. His ears perked up and his eyes widened at the sight of a basket on my back. **"D**o you have any fish**?"**

I couldn't help but chuckle. **"D**o you ever think about anything besides your stomach**?"** I asked in return, before obligingly dumping the basket onto the ground. I disconnected the saddle from where it had been hanging onto the thing and then kicked it over, revealing a nice catch of Icelandic cod.

"Of course. I think many highly complex thoughts a Squish like you could never hope to comprehend**,"** he answered with a haughty lift of his head. I snorted and he sniffed carefully at the basket. **"N**o eelâ€”well, at least you can learn**."**

"You're very welcome, Mr. High and Mighty**."**

That earned me a draconic smirk. **"A**t last, a better name than Toothless**."**

I rolled my eyes. **"O**h, yeah, those thoughts must be super complex for you not to understand sarcasm**."**

"Oh, you weren't being sincere about my might**?"** he asked, his eyes too innocently wide. **"S**hameâ€”I guess you can't learn after all**."**

I couldn't help itâ€”I laughed, and Toothless released an amused snort before gulping down several of the fish. As he had his meal for the day, I laid the saddle out on the ground, making sure every strap was straight, that the catgut was holding nicely, and that the buckles weren't about to fall off.

A smile crossed my face. I think it would do nicely. Standing, I also undid a bit of twine holding a loop of rope to my belt and tossed it onto the ground next to it. That was going to be my way of opening

and closing the finâ€"none of the dangers of Toothless holding the rope applied to a _rider_ holding it. This way, he'd still be able to land, breathe fire, speak, and claw his way out of situations.

***S**o what is that thing**?"**

Toothless's barely interested question brought me out of my thoughts, and I grabbed the leather before standing and holding it up to him.

A** saddle! I made it last nigh**â€"

***A** _what_**?"** he asked, looking confused and a little startled.

***W**hat in the All-Father's name is a _saddle_**?"**

I lifted the product of over six hours of design, leatherwork, and metallurgy, allowing him to come forward and sniff at it cautiously.

I**t goes on your back**, I explained eagerly. ***I**t'll make a spot that's comfortable enough for me to sit on**."***

Toothless reared back, his eyes narrowing to slits. ***S**it on my back**!"** he screeched, indignant. ***I** am _not_ one of those dumb beasts squishes tame**!"**

W**hat, you mean a horse**?"** I asked, my arms drooping slightly in surprise. His suddenâ€"and explosive, though thankfully not literallyâ€"anger threw me off. I hadn't expected him to not _want_ to wear it. ***I** never said you**â€"

***I** don't care what it's _called_, I will _not_ be ridden like one**!"** he roared, before leaping back and away.

***W**aitâ€"Toothless**!"** I lunged forward, but he ducked away. ***C**'mon, at least try it on! I worked hard on this**!"**

He ran out of my reach again, paws moving fast. ***W**ell then, sorry to waste your time, Squish, but I will _not_ wear that thing**!"** Toothless declared. He spread his wings and lifted his head proudly. ***I** am a _Night Fury_, the best of the dragons, the greatest and most intelligent being to soar the skies! Not some mindless beast**!"**

I sighed heavily. "Oh come _on!_" A glance down at my project sent determination flowing through my veins. I'd promised that I would fix what I'd done, and I wouldâ€"a little thing like a Night Fury's wounded pride was _not_ going to get in my way.

My eyes narrowed. ***F**ine**,*** I growled, low in my throat. Toothless's ears perked up in surprise, and some amount of wariness, at my tone. ***B**e that way**."***

He straightened, his head rising. ***I** wi**â€"***

I didn't even give him the chance to finish the sentence before taking off, hearing his surprised roar at my speed and sudden move.

But to my absolute shock, he wasn't just a stationary blur like everything else when I ranâ€"because even though I was moving so quickly, I saw _him_ move too!

Astonishment made me stop. I dug my feet into the dirt, feeling the soles of my boots stretch and wear as they buried themselves deep in the mossy soil with the sudden brake.

Standing exactly where he'd been less than a fraction of a second ago, I gaped as he folded his wings and watched me triumphantly from several feet away. ****W**hat**?** ****Toothless** asked, smug. ****D**id you really think you could outstrip the fastest dragon in the skies**?**

I never met someone who could match my speed before—and if that wasn't just a challenge, I'd eat Gobber's pegleg; hidden compartment for poker aces and all.

My eyes narrowed sharply and I hopped on one leg, and then the other, to yank my boots off. ****O**h it is _on**,**_**** I growled, crouching. He did as well, at the ready, and defiant grins grew over both our faces. ****C**'mere you**!**

I took off again, this time turning sharply when he sped away and kicking up a wave of soil almost three feet high.

Toothless roared, wove around the cove, and then leapt onto the sunny boulders, wings spread wide to catch air and move him faster. I followed, thankful that Thor had let my inborn klutziness only affect me at normal speeds as I leapt from boulder to boulder.

Unfortunately, I was slower in the air than on the ground, so I had some space to catch up when I hit dirt again.

****Y**ou couldn't catch a footless snail**!** ****Toothless** taunted in another roar.

****S**nails don't even _have_ feet**!** I returned, and winced—not exactly my best retort.

The Night Fury took it like bait. ****A**nd it looks like _you_ don't have any good comebacks**!**

I scowled and frowned in thought, then grinned. I turned to follow him again, but when he tried to cut across by flying to the left, I sidestepped, making him twist uncontrollably in the other direction.

Toothless landed with a screech in the water, and I laughed. ****A**nd it looks like _you're_ all wet**!**

Dripping wet, he stared at me for a good long moment before laughing. ****T**hank you for stating the obvious, Squish**,**** he snarked, before chuckling good-naturedly.

****O**nly to make sure you get it, Dragon**,**** I replied with a grin.

****A**lright, alright**.** His eyes took on a sly glint. ****Y**ou know, with me in here, I technically win**.** I did a double take. What did he mean by that? ****Y**ou can't reach me in here, can you**!** ****Toothless** crowed.

He jumped further into the lake, where the water started getting really deep. I stood, gaping, on the shore and unable to swim. _Dam# that dragon!_

Toothless splashed around happily in the water, and I walked up to the edge, looking down at my rippling reflection carefully. I'd nearly drowned in this water just yesterdayâ€”I'd had a hard time finally getting to sleep due to old nightmares of drowning. Did I really want to tempt Hel again?

I was about to shake my head and turn away, before a small memory came to mindâ€”how, when Toothless had thrown me into the water, how it had almost felt like hitting the ground.

That hadn't exactly been the first time I'd fallen into waterâ€”I'd had to have been saved by various bystanders when it was too deep, and that had been rather humiliatingâ€”but that hadn't felt like that any of those times. The only thing I could think of that was different was how fast I'd been going when I hit the surface.

I also knew that if you threw a stone fast enough, it would skip...

If hitting water fast makes it act almost solid, I wondered, glancing at my feet on the shore. _Could I maybeâ€”|?_

Toothless was jumping up and down in the water, like some giant black flying fish. Apparently his lack of left tailfin had no affect on his swimming. He wasn't expecting me. I grinned.

Spinning around, I jogged back a few yards before turning to face the lake. Crouching, I squinted at my target, and, with a cry that would strike fear into maybe a kitten, took off.

When I went from land to water, the only thing I felt was a change from soft and loamy to soft and wetâ€”and _I didn't sink._

I was running. _Over water!_

Laughing, I redoubled my speed and _ran on the water_ straight for the shocked-still Toothless.

I reached him and grabbed on, ignoring his indignant yowls and wrapping my arms around his neck before I stopped.

The second I did, I dropped and everything down to my waist got submerged. Toothless was looking at me with enormous eyes and flat, surprised ears, and I grinned up at him.

I** win**, I said.

Toothless seemed too shocked to speak for a moment, then sighed. ***F**ine**,*** he said, ***O**nly a _Squish_ would be foolish enough to risk Niflheim _again_ for something so trivial**,*** he muttered as he started paddling us both back to shore.

W**e're Vikings**, I said, shrugging, the response automatic. ***W**e have stubbornness issues**.**

Toothless snorted. **"That's an understatement if I've ever heard one."** We reached the shallow end and I let go to walk back to the saddle. He climbed out and shook himself, almost like a dog, to get rid of the extra water.

I picked up the saddle and brushed off any dirt and grass that had landed on it when I threw it aside. Toothless stepped forward, a few of his scales still glistening with moisture, his nostrils snuffling at the leather suspiciously.

"How long did you say you worked on this?"

I smiled and lifted it up, walking around his back. He tried to follow my gaze, and I had to jump forward to try and reach his moving back. **"Hey!"** hold still! **"**Toothless grudgingly did so and I put it on his back, reaching underneath to attach the right straps and buckles. It settled nicely just between his immense wings, leaving a little neck before his head started **"**looks like my luck for guessing his size was holding out. **"Eh, maybe six hours."**

If he had an eyebrow to raise, I had a feeling it would be high.

"And that means?"

Oh yeah, dragons probably didn't clock time by hours **"**they didn't exactly have sundials. I frowned, thinking over the time of the month, then smiled. **"From midnight until moonrise."**

Toothless gave me a surprised look. **"And you still had time to sleep? Gmot is _shrinking_."**

"I got seven hours **"**S³l was already past the horizon when I woke **"**, **"**I explained, not wanting to mention the nightmares. **"And** anyway, when the raids are as bad as they have been lately, we don't usually get more than three or four a night. It was enough for tonight and to make up for the night before **"**. **"**That seemed to quiet him, and I took a step back, looking over my handiwork. **"Looks good. Now for step three."**

The dragon snuffed. **"I** thought squishes were at least able to _count_ **"**what happened to one and two **"**?

Standing, I winced, but had to admit the truth. **"Most** of us _can_ count pretty well. Uh **"** Unfortunately, there are a couple **"** Neither Ruffnut nor Tuffnut could count past nine. I knew; I'd seen it. Snotlout, thank the gods, was better. He could get to twelve. I shook my head. **"Anyway.** One was your tailfin, two is the saddle. Three **"**, **"**I said, walking to scoop up the length of rope, **"i**s this **"**.

Toothless looked at me oddly. **"_W_ _hat_ about my tailfin?"**

That made me freeze where I stood.

Oh gods. Had he not realized? But Toothless was smart, self-aware **"**I'd known that even before I'd started talking to him. How could he not have noticed? **"Toothless"**, **"**I said, looking at him sadly, hoping I could break it gently. **"Your left"**

finâ€"it's**â€|""**

His eyes suddenly grew hard. **"Y**es, I know it's gone**,"** he snapped quickly, making me flinch. **"I**t's a bit hard to miss, the fact that I can't _fly _anymore**." **The pain in his voice at the word _fly_ made something inside of me crack.

"And I know why**."** My eyes snapped up as shock and guilt started pouring through that break in my chest. He knew? That I'd effectively been the one to sheer it off of his tailâ€"to ground him?

But then why hadn't he eaten me when he'd gotten the chance, after I freed him? Why was he even still _talking_ to me?

Toothless's gaze was toxic as ever, but his pupils weren't narrow like I'd been noticing they were when he was angryâ€"though they weren't super wide like when he was laughing, either. **"B**ut that's the past**."** What? I couldn't believe it was that simple, but I wasn't about to press further; not when every part of me felt like the lowest sludge. I nodded to the ground, numb. **"W**hat did you mean, my fin was step one**?"**

Right, I thought, not even noticing the careful tone in his voice. I was working to fix what I'd doneâ€"maybe I'd never be able to really redeem myself, but I could at least work towards what I _could_ manage. Barely lifting my head, I gestured down the length of his body. **"W**ellâ€"the prosthesis. _That_ was step one**."**

"Prosthesis**?"** he repeated, sounding confused and looking behind him.

When green eyes hit the half-open leather fake, his wings hit the ground in shock. I blinked in surprise as his knees wobbled, then collapsed under him. Toothless didn't seem to care though, only staring at his tail with the widest eyes I'd ever seen on him.

I guess he hadn't noticed he was wearing it. **"D**id you really not realize you've been wearing that all day**?"** I asked. That wasâ€| slightly less unbelievable. Better than him not noticing he was missing a part of his _body_.

Toothless's head snapped to me before turning back to the fin. He lifted his tail and brought it to his faceâ€"the hinges for the ribs swung freely as it moved, and holding his tail in the air in front of his eyes made it hang all the way open.

He looked at me, and though we'd only been speaking for maybe three days, it seemed like longer, so when I realized that I'd never seen an expression of pure shock like that on his face, it felt significant. **"Y**â€"you built this**?"** he asked. His voice was weak, almost a squeak.

I nodded. **"Y**eah**."**

"For me**?"**

I shrugged, looked at my toes. **"I** figuredâ€| I dunno. That it was the least I could do**."** Licking my lips, with guilt making me

contrite, I held up the rope. **"If you really don't want me to ride you, I could tie this between your fin and your foot—it'll be more difficult to control, but you'll be able to fly on your own, so—"**

"Fly?" He said the word like priests in temples might say *in*, or the Gyoja might say *Frigg* or *Hl-n*—with wonder and awe. Reverence. **"You're working, on me? Flying? Again?"**

There was barely time to nod a *yes* before he slammed me to the ground.

But unlike last time, when he'd nearly eaten me and had blown out my eardrums, Toothless didn't threaten me at all—instead, a wide, slimy, forked tongue shot out and dragged wetly across my face and chest.

"Thank you!" **"The pure joy released echoed in his roar like the sound of a summer thunderstorm, warm and crackling."**

"What?" Toothless, *ew*! **"I didn't have to protest much, though, because he climbed off of me almost immediately. When he looked at me, there was something new in his eyes—gratitude, definitely, and maybe respect, but I like to think I had caught a glimpse a sign of real friendship in there too."**

Instead of bowling me over again, he stepped forward and nuzzled his head into my hand, looking up at me with bright eyes. **"Thank you, Hiccup,"** he said, sincere. **"You're giving me something greater than my life."**

Whoa. Surprised at his serious words, I wondered how much flying really meant to dragons—I expected a lot, of course, and I knew it was *worth* his life, because *a* downed dragon—so I'd thought flying was equal to their life. I hadn't thought it would be more.

Blushing, I smiled and scratched lightly at the scales on his head. **"Yeah, well. You kinda saved my life a couple times already, so I guess we're kinda even, you know?"**

The grin he gave me was toothless and adorable, and I laughed at the sight of it. **"So,"** I said, **"let's get the saddle off then, and I'll tie the—"**

"No."

I blinked at him, surprised. He didn't want the saddle taken off? After all the fight he'd made of putting it *on*, like two minutes ago? Was this the same dragon? **"What?"**

Toothless nodded decisively. **"I'm wearing the saddle. You will get me back in the air."**

I gaped at him. **"But—I'm the one who knocked you out of it!"**

For some reason, that just made Toothless smirk. **"Exactly. Now"**

tie that rope, Squishâ€"those opposable thumbs are the only thing your species is good for, anyway**."**

Thrown off by the sudden change of heart, all I could do was follow orders.

* * *

><p>Twenty Minutes laterâ€"

Climbing out of the lake for the second time that day, I ripped my sopping coat off and pulled my notebook out of the basket while Toothless dried off in the sun.

Figure out how tailfin helps with steering!

Make some kind of harness so I won't fall off again!

"Are you always this accident-prone**?"** Toothless asked. Whined, really. Apparently, he didn't like getting this wet that muchâ€"though I wasn't exactly happy either. He'd had to save me again. But I'd managed to get the mostly-waterproof kind of treated leather, so at least the saddle wouldn't start rotting immediately. **"O**r did Loki just decide to kick you in the face this week**?"**

"Unfortunately, yes**,"** I answered honestly, adding one more underline to the statement before closing the book. **"I** think Loki has taken a kind of joy in kicking _me_, especially, in the face, for pretty much my entire life**."**

Toothless snorted. I sighed and looked around. There was no way we were going to try flying again immediately, while we were still both wet.

Standing, I went over to Toothless and made the motions to pull off the saddle. **"I**t needs to dry separately, or it'll give you blisters**,"** I explained as I pulled at the straps.

Toothless snorted. **"S**kins? Break through _these_ scales? Not likely**."** He let me work, though, sitting motionless as I pulled the thing off of him.

"So I found out that I can only talk to other dragons if I'm touching them**,"** I said as I laid the saddle out in the sun. Once it was good and drying, I settled down, sitting with my legs crossed beside it and in front of the sunning, lazy dragon.

"Really**?"** Toothless asked, not sounding very interested. **"H**ow'd you manage to find a dragon to test it on? Was there a raid I didn't hear**?"**

I winced. **"S**omething like that**,"** I hedged. Toothless opened one eye and gave me a _look_, and I sighed. **"M**y dad signed me up for dragon-training**."**

Both of his eyes opened and he looked at me as if I were insane. **"D**ragons can't be trained**!"**

U**h, no**â€| I winced and scratched the back of my neck.
***B**ut Vikingsâ€s squishesâ€can be. And are. Trained. To,
to**â€|***

K**ill dragons**, Toothless finished, his voice flat. I winced and nodded, but quickly continued.

G**obberâ€my mentorâ€introduced us to a Zippleback yesterday, and I tried growling at it when it came at me. It froze when I did, but when I came back to its cage that night to apologize, neither of us could really understand each other until I was touching at least one of their heads**."

T**hen you could speak to them**?" I nodded. Toothless hummed thoughtfully, closing his eyes again. ***I**t's still probably due to the fact that we'reâ€| family**."*** I wasn't sure if he realized he made a face whenever he said the word, but I wasn't about to tell him. It was kind of a funny face. ***S**ince you've got a connection to one kind of dragon, by association, you're connected to all dragonsâ€just not as strongly. Contact strengthens the connection so that you can use your Gift to speak, if indirectly**."***

I nodded, then hesitated. ***S**oâ€| you're not mad about me not telling you? About the training**?"***

Toothless hummed. ***M**aybe a little. More that you hid it from me, than what it isâ€we might have known one another for just a few days, but we're still aerie. There should be no secrets**."***

I lowered my head in shame, and he paused before continuing.
I**t's a good idea on the squish part. I mean, obviously, I'm not _happy_ about it, but I can't blame parents for wanting to make sure their young are ready for battle. You aren't as naturally protected as our hatchlings are**." One eye peeked open. ***I** _really_ can't blame your sire for that. You can't weigh more than a sheepâ€is your running the only reason you haven't been picked up and carried off yet**?"***

The insult made any shame I felt evaporate. ***N**o! I'll have you know I'm not even _allowed_ to run in the village! My survival is all me**!" **And Gobber. And my dad. And about three-quarters of the villagersâ€| But no need for him to know that.

Toothless snorted. ***L**oki kicks you and HlÃ-n takes pity, then**."***

U**rgh, fine. Never mind**." I stood and went back to the basket, fishing out the last thing still on the bottomâ€a small otterskin bag, holding hooks and lines.

Holding them to my chest, I looked at Toothless over my shoulder. He was almost asleep, the lazy reptile. "I'll just be over here, then," I muttered in Norse, walking over to the shore.

Some time and a small, death-defying struggle later, I had a nice row of six cod, butterflied and hanging out to dry on a piece of twine strung out between two branches.

It wasn't nearly enough to make up in the storehouse for what I'd given Toothless the last two days, but it'd have to do for now. This

little lake seemed to be the only bit of water that the raiding dragons _hadn't_ found and emptiedâ€”if I took too much, then the result would be the same and Berk would be one step closer to starvation.

Now to keep the birds away from them until they driedâ€”|

W**hy in fire's name are those fish in that tree**?*

Toothless's question made me yelp and jump into the air, and he laughed when I slipped and fell on hitting the ground again. I glared as I stood back upâ€”it didn't seem to have any affect on him at all.

T**hat wasn't funny**, I hissed.

T**hat was _very_ funny**, Toothless disagreed, still chuckling. ***S**o, why are they up there**?****

I**'m drying them out**.** I could see he didn't understand, so I continued. ***T**hat way, they won't be stinking and starting to rot by the time I get them back to the village**.*****

V**illageâ€”is that what you call your Nest**?** I nodded, and Toothless sniffed up at the fish. ***W**ow. They must be in serious trouble to need a Squish as small as you to get food**.*****

That one irked me a little. ***W**e're _all_ pitching in, no matter how big we are**,*** I snapped, before looking up to the fish and sighing. ***A**nd we're not in serious trouble. Just yet. But with SkaÃ¶i's first freeze around the corner**â€”|***

I shook my head and glanced back at him. He looked thoughtful, so it was probably time to get going. ***S**addle should be dry enough by now. I'll use some of the extra rope to tie myself to your back**.*****

W**e're trying again**?** Toothless asked, his earflaps perking up.

Smiling, I patted him on the head. ***B**ud, we're not stopping until you're back in the air**.*****

* * *

><p>We spent the entire day in the airâ€”or at least, trying to stay in itâ€”never venturing too far from the little cove. Going south would get us worryingly close to the village and any farther north would put us close to the sea. With my swimming _un_ability, there was no way either of us were willing to go over that deep a body of water until we were both more certain we wouldn't both die in the attempt.

By the time we landed back in the cove, the sun was setting, the air was turning cool, my thighs were burning up a storm, and I felt better and happier than I had in my entire life. Toothless's sides were heaving and, judging from the roars of pure delight he'd made up there, I think he felt the way I did.

I was bruised and battered and exhausted, but happy as I collapsed on the ground. **"O**h man. I haven't had that great a day in **"ever**!" **I** realized, motioning to the dusky sky. **"I** think this has been the best day in my **entire** life!"

"You're leading a pretty pathetic life, then", **Toothless** said, but I heard him grinning just as widely as I was.

"Shut up, what was the highlight of your life before this?" **I** asked, turning on my side. I held out my hands, shaking them in fake eagerness and making a mock-excited face. **"O**ooh, **cod** for **d**! Oooh, flying! Oooh, **cod** for **n**! Oooh, sleep! And then rinse and repeat, right?" **I** asked, letting my hands drop with a grin.

Toothless gave me a look. **"A**nd how is that different from what we did today?"

I opened my mouth, stuck for a moment, before grinning. **"I**n which case, your life is just as **pathetic** as you say mine is!"

The dragon groaned. **"I** **don't** know why I bother. There's no reasoning with you, you ridiculous Squish!"

"Right back at you, you arrogant Dragon!" **I** groaned and stretched, popping my back a few times before sitting up and glancing at the fish. They still needed some time to dry before I felt they would be ready to sneak into the village. **"I** also needed time for it to get dark enough so that people wouldn't see me running back in. Until then!"

"Hey, Toothless, you still hungry?" **I** asked, standing.

He snuffed and shook his head. **"T**his morning's basket will last me halfway through tomorrow. I don't eat nearly as much as some of the heavier breeds", he explained.

Well, that was good to know. Maybe I could cut down and space out the amounts, so that I could feed him enough every morning, or maybe twice a day. **I** make it less noticeable that I was effectively stealing from the storehouse.

Which really was what it was. The thought made me glance back at the drying fish again. I had to find some way to make up for what I was taking, but until then, I guess I was tightening my own belt to ease the burden.

I straightened my back and pulled my coat tighter. Food or not, I'd need a fire to keep me warm until it was dark enough to leave.

Luckily for me, there was plenty of dried wood lying around, having fallen from the ancient oaks and pines standing around the high edges of the cove walls. It only took me a few minutes to get enough fuel and build a fire by the rocks. **"yes** I know how to build a fire. Not only does fire absolutely love me, but all Viking children are taught how to make one. It just so happened that I was the one Viking kid lucky enough to never have to worry about tinder.

I felt Toothless's eyes on me as I stacked the wood in a cone before

I drew out my strike-a-light. **"What's that?"** he asked.

"A strike-a-light," I explained, waving it. It was shaped like two 'e's, one put upside down on the other's head, and then the whole thing turned sideways. **"Perfect example of Viking ingenuity with metal, and lack of imagination with tool-names. You rub the hook end on the rough, thicker part in the middle to make a spark. Spark means fire. One _strike_ and you have a _light_."**

Toothless didn't look impressed. Honestly, I wasn't either.

"Don't insult me by taking that out when I'm around," he said. Then he shot a blast of blue fire.

"No, waiâ€_AAAH_!"

With me so close by, the shotâ€made small enough to just start the campfireâ€exploded into something near the size and heat of the beacons in the carved heads around the island's shore. Out of an inborn human and stupid instinct, I covered my (fireproof) face with my (very extremely flammable) arms as I was blown backwards.

When I landed several feet away, my arms were literally burning.

On _fire!_

Swearing and yowling in shock and pain, I scrambled up and sprinted for the shoreâ€most of the fire was put out the moment I took off, and it was doused entirely when I shoved them underwater.

"Hiccup!" Toothless was a huge black warmth by my side, huffing with worried breath. **"Oh Surtur's great realmâ€are you okay?"**

"Iâ€I'll beâ€| fine," I said, smiling weakly up at him. It really hurt, and the water felt so good I didn't think I wanted to ever leave.

But just to reassure him, I pulled my arms out of the lake.

And promptly hissed as Toothless let out a horrified yelp. Most of the fabric had been burned away by the super-heated flames (fire gets a lot hotter when I get close, but when it's _on me_â€|), and it left the wounds perfectly visible. My arms were bright red, and some of the skin looked as if it were peeling. On each forearm, where it was worst, there were little, shining bubbles appearing from the skin, expanding across and through some of the smaller smithing scars I'd gathered over the years.

"That," I said, almost numbly, **"actually looks worse than it feels."**

"That's not exactly reassuring!" Toothless yelped, his eyes wide. **"Oh gods. Oh _gods_, Cousin, Iâ€Iâ€"**

If dragons could hyperventilateâ€| I tried to reach out and pat him. The movement of my arms was a bad idea, and I whimpered, but it

didn't stop me from trying to calm him down. **"T-Toothless"** bud, it's-it's alright! It was my own stupid fault**."**

His eyes were big meeting mine. **"I"** should've remembered what you said about the fire**."**

I shrugged. That didn't hurt as bad. **"I"** didn't exactly explain it super clearly, that fire gets bigger and badder when I'm around. And I could've gotten awayâ€"it's not like I can't move fast enoughâ€"or at least, I should've blocked it with my chest**."** His eyes somehow managed to grow wid_er_ and I quickly scrambled to explain. **"I"**'m fireproof where it counts, probably to make sure I didn't die before my first birthday. Just my arms and my legs can get burnt. It's nothing. Really, Toothless, it wasn't your fault**."**

Seeing the doubt on his face, I forced myself to ignore the pain, put both of my hands on either side of his face, and looked directly into his eyes. **"L"**isten to me**,"** I said seriously. **"T"**his. Was. _Not._ Your fault**."**

Toothless met my gaze for a moment before pulling gently out of my grip. Before I could ask what he was doing, his tongue shot out and he licked a long stripe down each of my arms.

"_Ah_" That _stung_â€"wait. "Whoa," I said, staring down at my _numbing_ arms. "Toothless, whaâ€"| what did you _do_?"

He nosed at my hands again. **"I"**t won't heal them, butâ€"| that probably won't fester, now. And _you_, you little flame, had better warn me about any future mishaps like that. Licking Squish wounds isn't exactly on the top of my to-do list. You all taste _terrible_**."**

Ignoring his insults as usual, I smiled. Infection and the rot was a terrifying thought even when you _weren't_ the one injured, so Toothless's words were a big load off my chest, actually. **"T"**hanks, bud**,"** I said, a little touched. He snorted and didn't meet my eyes.

A glance back at the pit I'd built made me chuckle. **"W"**ell, at least the fire's burning**."**

Toothless's eyes rolled. **"O"**h great. My only aerie's an _optimist_**."**

Laughing, I led us back to the fire's side, watching the height and heat carefully as I got closer. At a spot where it was comfortably warm and nicely lit, I plopped down on the grass. Toothless fell down next to me, tucking his paws underneath his body into a loaf, and we both watched the embers and ash rise into the darkening skies.

I looked up, imagining that I could see the way the wind flew through the heavens. Sailors and raiders said that unless a storm was brewing, wind moved in straight linesâ€"I don't know why, but I never really believed that. Something told me that sometimes, it would curve and twist in the air, a celestial dancer's invisible ribbon. I figured it would move randomly and gracefully, like water does in a stream, or like I figured Toothlessâ€"| had done. When he had still been able to fly on his own.

"H**ey Toothless**?" I asked, guilt and confusion still stabbing at my chest.

"H**m**?" I think he was half-asleep by this point-he was obviously nocturnal, and my visits were keeping him awake-but I had to know.

"W**hy don't you hate me**?" That got a green eye to open, looking at me as if I were insane. After two days of cowardly hiding what I'd done, though, I had to say it. ***"I**'m serious. Iâ€"Iâ€"I took you down, _hurt_ you! Ripped away your tailfin, your ability to flyâ€" that was my doing. My fault**."*** He raised his head from where he'd laid it, looking at me in quiet interest. ***"I**f someone had done that to me**â€"|"***

Toothless's lips quirked. ***"S**omeone _did_ just do it to you**,"*** he reminded me, unfolding a wing to push gently at my shoulder. The burns didn't hurt at the touchâ€"in fact, it felt like something soothing flowed through the point where he'd hit me. ***"A**nd you forgave. Almost instantly**."***

I rolled my eyes. ***"T**hat's different. This'll heal in a couple weeks, no problem, and I'll be back to normal. And besides, we know we'reâ€" family now**."*** For some reason, it wasn't as hard for me to imagine Toothless as family as I thought it should've been. ***"C**ousins forgive little things like that. But you saidâ€"that flying was something huge to dragons**."***

His eyes turned sad, and he looked to the fire. ***"I**t is that**,"*** he admitted, before glancing back at me. ***"W**hat do squishes believe about the gods**?"***

The question threw me off. ***"U**h**â€"|"*** It took me a moment, but then my brain kicked back into gear. ***"W**ell, OÃ°in All-Father and Frigg are the rulers of the Ã°sÃ°-r. Thor is one of OÃ°in's sons, who we both have aâ€" special relationship to**,"*** I nodded to him, and he smirked at my continued hesitancy. Rolling my eyes, I continued. ***"T**here's nine Realms, on Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life. We, dragons and humansâ€"you know, squishesâ€"live on Midgardâ€" Is any of this different from what you guys know**?"***

"N**ope**," Toothless replied, popping the 'p'. ***"B**ut I think there's one thing you might not have**."*** He turned his face to look at the sky and I followed his gazeâ€"the smoke from the fire disappeared into the black velvet, and the flying embers joined their brothers the stars. ***"W**e believe that the gods, in everything, prefer balance in the world. An imbalance needs to be corrected, and will be, by them, somehow**."***

He looked at me and smirked. ***"Y**ou have an affinity for fire, are mostly fire_proof_â€"but you can't swim. It's their kind of humor. See where I'm going with this**?"***

I nodded slowly, and scowled. ***"I** wish their _humor_ was a little less _potentially fatal_, then**."***

Toothless laughed. ***"W**hat are gods, but beings who play with death and the elements like you do toys**?"*** he asked. ***"A**ndâ€"would yourâ€" _Vikings_ follow them if they weren't that ruthless**?"***

He made an excellent point. Even Baldr, our god of all things good and beautiful, was a battle-hardened warrior. **"What does this have to do with your tail, though?"** I wondered.

"Everything," he answered. **"You, with your bolas, took away one of my tailfins. That made an imbalance in my flight, one that by all rights should have killed me. You should have killed me."**

"But I didn't."

"No, so you upset the balance again," Toothless said with a grin. **"It's amazing the gods still look at you at all, if you've been making them work as hard all your life as you did the last few days."**

I was making the gods work hard? Me? Though, come to think of it, that would explain a few things—like why they tended to hate me. **"The gods righted the second imbalance, the one where you were an idiot Squish and didn't kill a very dangerous predator, by helping me make the decision to not kill you,"** Toothless continued. **"The fact that you admitted then and there that you were my cousin through Thor played a part in me sparing your life—that, and the fact that you'd just spared mine."**

"Then, the gods fixed the first imbalance—my missing tailfin."

"How do you figure that?"

Toothless gave me one of his signature grins. **"They gave me you. An aerie, to give me a new kind of joy, since flying had been torn from me—and then even to give me flight itself back.""** He lifted his tail and brought it between us, making the prosthesis fall open and spreading the other side just as wide.

I gaped, caught by the symmetry I'd noticed the very first day I'd really seen Toothless—something that almost hadn't really registered, but now stood like a golden statue, beautiful and striking in the firelight. And I'd helped reconstruct it.

"I don't hate you for what you did, because you fixed it, in more than one way," Toothless explained simply. **"You've given me companionship, food, and flight—a life, my life. Things I didn't even have before I crashed here. I can't hate you, Cousin, because you are what balances me out. You're part of me now."**

His words entranced me, barely audible over the crackling fire and the chirping of the nightlife around us. There was truth in what he was saying, something soul-deep to him that even resonated with a part of me I hadn't felt in a while—the part that had known that that was my night, the part that had known where to shoot, the part that had nearly burst when he'd first roared into my ears. That part of me, just inside my chest, had lain quiet for the last few days—now it was vibrating with the night, with its sounds, with Toothless's every word and admission.

Awed and touched, I reached out and laid a hand on the soft spot just behind Toothless's ear. It twitched, but he didn't buck me off, and

we shared a quiet smile.

Then he cleared his throat. **"Of course, if you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it and set fire to that ridiculous false thing you call a coat."**

I spluttered, barely able to believe the sudden switch in tone—or the insult. **"It's a real coat!"**

"No it's not. Those scraps of fur on your head and face, those are your coat. That, that is wearing another creature's skin."

Well when you put it like that. I shuddered, but held firm. **"Well what do you want me to do, freeze?"** I asked. **"This thing used to be an eight-foot tall bear my dad brought down, would you rather the fur have just sat there and rot?"**

Toothless snorted and laid his head back down on his paws. **"It's still not a coat."**

I rolled my eyes, set to ignore him, and it was then that my stomach decided to rumble. Or roar. Roar was a better word for it.

We both looked up, surprised, then down at my midsection. Toothless broke down into laughter. **"I thought that was your coat-bear brought back to life!"**

"Oh, ha ha," I said, tucking my legs close to my chest and gingerly wrapping my wounded and numbed arms around them, hiding my stomach from view. He started rolling around in the grass. **"It's not that funny!"**

Toothless straightened, still chuckling, and shook his head. **"Typical Squish, hungry all the time, eating nonstop."** I tried to scowl and he snorted again. **"Well? What are you waiting for?"** I looked at him, not understanding. **"There's a good amount of fish still hanging from that tree. I doubt you're the stupidest Squish, and I'm fairly certain even they know to go for food when they're hungry and it's right in front of them."**

"Was that almost a compliment?" I asked, grinning. Toothless huffed and didn't answer. I glanced back at the fish and my smile dropped. I could smell them from here; my stomach grumbled again, not as loud this time at least. I was so hungry. Memories of a childhood with no mother and a busy father danced through my head, brought back by the familiar sensation of an empty stomach.

But no. **"Squishes are plenty smart,"** I said quietly, forcing my attention back to the fire. **"Smart enough to know when they've taken their share, and that when they have, other food belongs to someone else."**

Toothless didn't reply—"I'm not sure he would've, even if he'd had time. As it turned out, he didn't have time, because at that very moment, a sharp caw broke through the air.

Both of our heads snapped over and my eyes widened at the sight of a large black bird pecking at the twine over one of the fish. "Hey!"

I shouted, shooting to my feet, my own hunger feeding my annoyance at this thief. The raven looked up but pecked again, unbothered by the scrawny Viking heading its way. "Hey, hey! Get away from those! Those aren't yours!"

I ran over to it, picking up a stick to swat it away—but a blast of purple plasma beat me to it.

The perfectly aimed shot missed the fish, but completely roasted the bird. It fell off the twine with a final squawk, and hit the ground, limp and dead.

Turning around, I gaped at Toothless, who looked, of course, smug. **"N**t is served**,"** he said.

"Unbelievable," I muttered.

No use looking a gift-raven in the mouth, I guessed. I went over and picked up the bird by the claws carrying it back to the fire with the stick I'd been planning to use as a swatter. It would make a nice roasting stick, now.

I sat down beside him and pulled out my seaxe—"Toothless didn't even flinch at the sight of the weapon anymore—to prepare the bird. **"W**e'd better hope O**in won't hold this against us**,"** I warned with a smile. To be perfectly honest, I was a little nervous—there was no explicit warning against eating the black birds, but they were still the messengers and symbols of the All-Father.

Toothless snorted. **"S**omehow I doubt Huginn or Muninn would be trying to feast on your drying fish, if they've got food waiting in Asgar**."**

He made a good point. Having bled the bird out, I started plucking the feathers—they were black and glossy, larger and more beautiful than I expected. **"W**onder what I can do with these**,"** I muttered, holding one up.

Toothless huffed. **"M**ake yourself a crown. You'll be King of the Squishes**."**

I screwed my lips up, unimpressed. **"O**r I could make you one**,"** I said, picking up a few more and tossing them deftly on top of his head.

His eyes crossed, trying to look at the things on his head. The sight made me giggle—I mean chuckle. Manly. **"B**ehold**!"** I laughed. **"R**uler of the Dragons and the sky! King Toothless**!"**

To my surprise and delight, he raised his neck regally. **"A** worthy crown**,"** he said, shaking his head in approval. Half of the feathers fell off with the movement, drifting slowly to the ground, and I had to choke my laughter with a hand. **"I**'m glad you've finally discovered my rightful title, my Squishy little subject. Bask, bask in my glory and power**."**

That did it. The feathers and the completely straight-faced way he said it—I broke down and Toothless joined me, laughing into the night.

* * *

><p>POSSIBLE SPOILER ALERT: Re-reading this last bit, I'm seeing a whole crap-ton of connections to both the books ("King of the Wilderwest" Hiccup) and the movies ("Two New Alphas"). Huh. I assure you, that was not intentional, but it makes for good foreshadowing, doesn't it? **END SPOILERS****>

A guest reviewer pointed out something I said in the first chapter, concerning the bifrost: yes, you are correct, it was the rainbow bridge to the other Realms, but the Norse saw it within the Milky Way in the sky. That's what I was referencing in the chapter-hope that clears things up!

Strike-a-lights are real. I saw one at the National Archaeology Museum in Dublin a few weeks ago, and giggled because they look exactly like I knew they would.

If you have any questions or comments, let me know!

Hope you liked it,

PEACE,

~Tibki

10. Chapter 10

Hey y'all!

Glad you liked last chapter, you ready for this one?

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TEN_

The next morning, I woke up to the lovely sound of BOOM BOOM BOOM.

I yelped and shot up, scrambling for cover and falling off the bedâ€”I thought a raid was happening, but a glance around showed sunlight peeking through the window.

Annoyance flared briefly. It had been a miracle that I'd even gotten back to Berk after last nightâ€”with a stomach full of food, a hot fire in front of me and the warm presence of Toothless beside me, I'd been comfortable and most of the way to whatever dream-realm NÃ³tt had seen fit to send me when ZIPPLEBACK.

I'd forgotten to get Slither and Tricky their yak milk! I'd jumped up with a quick apology and explanation to Toothless, before packing up everything and zooming back to Berk.

After the shock and the frantic run, there had been too much adrenaline in my system to go to sleep, so I spent a few hours setting a hook into the side of the saddle, and a permanent latch and line onto my belt.

With that finished, and still not tired, I spent another half an hour logging everything I thought important into the Manualâ€”that Night Furies were fish-eaters, but Zipplebacks liked yak, for the milk, and fresh yak at that, because eating dead ones meant stinking gas. On the _General_ page, I drew a striped eel and explained that dragons seemed to _fear_ the things, for some reason.

What I couldn't put into the Manual, because of what the information said about me, I put into my Dragon notebook. I wrote down how I'd started speaking with Toothless, and how I could speak to the Zippleback tooâ€”I complained about how their cage was much too small. I wrote down the belief system Toothless had explained to me, sketching out how it applied to our own relationship.

By the time everything was written, I was exhausted, and my arms were stinging again, so I went to sleep.

That didn't feel like more than ten minutes ago, so the annoyance _definitely_ flared.

Grumbling to myself in Dragonese because growling was more satisfying than muttering at this time of morning, I pretty much stumbled down the stairs and into the main part of the house.

There still wasn't a doorâ€”funnily enough, I hadn't given it much thought lately, with a saddle and tail to build insteadâ€”so the moment I was on the ground floor, I saw Astrid knocking on the jamb.

The sight of her_ at my house _surprised me into full wakefulness.

"Whaâ€”Astrid! What're you doin' here?" I asked.

Despite the time, she looked as perfectly put together and deadly as alwaysâ€”her blonde hair _just_ the right combination of bound tightly and messily pulled out, probably by exertion. I could see a sheen of sweat on her forehead and guessed she'd been up since early, practicing.

"You're late for morning practice," she said in place of a greeting. She did not sound impressed.

I frowned and glanced at the sky. No, I had not slept in impossibly badly, SÃ³l was barely over the horizon. "What're you talking about, t-training doesn't begin until this afternoon?"

"Yeah, but _practice_ starts at sunrise, and _you're_ holding us up!"

Before I could protest or even ask what the difference between _practice_ and _training_ was, she grabbed me by the arm and yanked me out into the cold.

"Ow-OW!"

Pain shot up my forearm at the rough treatment and I cried out, snatching the appendage back. The last thing I'd done before sleeping last night, by the way, was wrap both of my forearms messily in bandages and a soothing ointment Grandmother Gothi had written me the

recipe for.

Astrid, surprised at my reaction, stepped back. Her eyes went immediately to my armsâ€”despite the long sleeves of my (once 'spare', now 'only' with last night's ruined; I needed to make a new one) shirt, the bandages were pretty noticeable as extra padding. "What happened to _you_?"

"Uhâ€”forging accident!" It wasn't that hard a lie to come up withâ€”I've got plenty of burn scars on my forearms already some real accidents, spilling hot metal or losing my grip. "Yeah, made the fire too hot, got too close to the anvilâ€”happens to the best of us, you know?"

"Will it scar?"

Judging by how it looked last night? "Uhâ€”probably?"

A small smirk crossed her lips and I almost beamed at saying the right thing. "Sounds like fun." The expression fell back to flat. "Now come _on_, we're late as it is."

She didn't grab me this time, which I was thankful for, but she did immediately start walking off without another word. I jogged to catch up with her, underlining my mental note to make a new doorâ€”while nothing too bad would happen, since Dad was way too respected, it still wouldn't do to forever have the Chief's house open for anyone to come in at anytime. Especially when the Chief wasn't even on-island in the first place.

"So," I said, slowing down as I got to her side. Astrid, for her part, looked a little surprised that I'd caught up. Typical. "How-how's your practicing thing going?"

Astrid's eyes narrowed dangerously and her hand twitched to the axe strapped to her back. "Why?" she asked, her voice full of a warning I'd have to be as stupid as Toothless was always saying I was to ignore. "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"No! No, no, I didn't! I wouldn't!" I promised, waving my hands quickly. "I justâ€”I dunno, just wanted to make conversation, or something."

She looked at me oddly before grunting and moving her handâ€”thank Freyjaâ€”back to her side, away from her weapon. It would've been humiliating to have been killed by a weapon I'd sharpened myself.

(At least I would've been guaranteed a spot in Valhalla; I don't think even OÃ°in would say that a warrior who'd died facing Astrid hadn't earned his place there.)

"It's going well," she answered, a spark of accomplishment entering her eyes. "I think I figured out a new kind of defensive position with Reginlief."

My eyebrows rose, impressed. "Wow, that's, uhâ€”that's pretty cool."

"Yeah, it is. What about you?" I froze, and stared at her, confused.

"What happened in the Ring with the Zippleback?" what was _that_ all about?"

I winced. I should've guessed that would need an explanation! Thinking quick, I said the first thing that came to mind, and it was a phrase that I would _quickly_ learn to regret.

"That, uh, _Astrid_!" I said, nervously, pointing to her, "That would be"uh, _telling_, now wouldn't it?"

Quickly, by the way, meant _immediately_, because the expression that _immediately_ crossed her face _immediately_ sent fear trilling through my entire body. I pulled my finger back for fear of losing it.

Luckily"I think, hard work or not, every god in every Realm was smiling on me at that moment"we reached the Ring at that very moment.

"There ye two are!" Gobber called from the entrance, waving his false hand in the air. Right now it was a large axe, chipped to the point of no use on both ends"I recognized it. He only wore it on those few, horrible times Dad had convinced him it was a good idea to try and train me into physical fitness.

"Oh no," I groaned, my feet suddenly not wanting to take me any closer. It felt like every bruise on my body from yesterday's flight practice decided now would be a good time to throb in unison, at the very idea of his training. I walked up to Gobber and clapped my hands together, begging. "Gobber, please"please_ don't make me do this"

"Sorry, Hicca!" Gobber said, sounding not very sorry at all. "This is no' just yer av'rage trainin' day"this's also mean' to build bonds and frien'ships between the trainees!"

So the twins and Snotlout were here too? "That makes it _worse_"!"

But he didn't listen, and twenty minutes later, I was struggling to cart a yoke with a pair of sand-filled buckets across the Ring floor, while the others did laps around me.

Snotlout ran up to me, carrying the same load weighing my shoulders down in each hand with little problem. "Having a little problem there, _cuz_?" he laughed, before dancing around me and running ahead.

Sweating pouring down my head, I wished I had enough breath to shout back to him. It irked me, Snotlout calling me _cuz_ like that"especially when a one-thousand pound fire-breathing _reptile_ had proven himself a better cousin over three days than he had over the past fifteen years.

Finally"finally_"I made it over to the other side. With a relieved groan that had hints of a draconic whine, I let the yoke fall, a little sand spilling off the edge of one of the buckets.

Bjorn, one of the few thralls we kept on the island, picked up the

yoke easily but gave me a sympathetic look with his one eye as he carried them and the other discarded buckets away. His mother, Ansa, had been a prisoner of war given to us as a gift of hospitality by another tribe during a visit before I was bornâ€"she had two sons who my dad's dad had named Bjorn and Germdish, though she had given them names in her mothertongue (Karhu and Petri, respectively).

We didn't really treat them as thralls, like the other tribes would've; they were born on Berk, and growing up here meant weathering everything from winters to dragons together. Surviving together on Berk built bonds of friendship and trust that you couldn't really spit on by treating the other half as less than human. They had short hair (my own was short only because of a small accident involving lots of honey and even more bees), but that was pretty much the only thing that separated them from the rest of the tribe.

Several years older than myself, Germdish had actually been something of a big brother to me (and despite being tiny, I was still the only son of the Chief, to give you an idea of how much we really didn't care about their status), growing upâ€"he'd been the one to discover that I was left-handed, just like him, and encouraged me to try the writing and seaxe moves I'd been failing so badly at using it instead of my right. He'd practiced with me, even though I was still only less horrible using the correct hand, and was currently off on one of the ships with my father.

(Most of the village thanked him every day for his discovery concerning my hands; who even knew how much more clumsy I'd be, how many more buildings I'd bring down, if I'd tried to keep doing everything with my right? Village or not, they probably would've shipped me off long agoâ€"I probably owed Petri my life.)

Bjorn, who wasn't as close to me but who was still kinder than most of the village, had chosen to stay rather than join the search with his brother, being more of a rural labor kind of guy than a warrior. It also had something to do with the fact that his entire left side was heavily scarred from a raid years ago. He'd lost an eye and some of the mobility in his arm in a fight with a Nadder, so he wouldn't do anyone much good out on the battlefield anyway.

Today, it was his job to take the sand up to the spectator level, where it'd be returned into the sacks we used during the spring as dykesâ€"the runoff from the snow, once it melted, tended to completely flood every stream on the island of Berk, and sometimes the village of Berk too, while it was at it.

"Good job Hicca!" Gobber called. I doubled over, wincing at the movement but using my arms to prop myself on my knees. "No' a bad warmupâ€"let's ge' started now!"

I wanted to collapse. I know it wasn't funâ€"I'd collapsed beforeâ€"but at that point, the wooziness and nausea and the furry mouth on waking up would be more enjoyable than Gobber's workout schedule.

"Finally!" Ruffnut said, throwing her arms out from where she was lying next to a wall. "I thought it would be RagnarÅ¸k before he finished."

"Nah," Tuffnut said, smirking. "It wouldn't start without himâ€"he's the only one clumsy enough to kick it off!"

Laughter broke out and I blushed furiously, straightening up out of my doubled-up position but hunching my shoulders. I knew I was clumsy, and I knew I was jumpyâ€"but Ragnar? Wasn't that a little far? I was a lot of things, but hopeless enough to start the end of the world?

(Then again, some of the fires and explosions I'd caused in the village wouldn't be too far off, on a much smaller scaleâ€|)

"Firs' thin' we'll be doin' t'day is hammer-work!"

Oh great. Only my worst weaponâ€"I'm better with a sword, despite having no training at all, than I am with a warhammer. Probably because they get brought into the forge more often than hammers do.

Gobber motioned us over to a corner of the Ring where six or seven huge hammers were lying on the ground. Each one was made of either a large rock or a stiff piece of wood, and none of them were in good shapeâ€"we saved our better hammers for the armory, but the old or badly-made ones were kept for practice.

I recognized a few of these thingsâ€"my earliest attempts at forging. They almost held fond memories.

Astrid picked up one of my fond memories and tossed it up in the air, catching it with a scowl. "Who made this piece of junk? Gobber, how are we supposed to work with this trash?"

Ouch. I winced, and Gobber chuckled, clapping me on the back and nearly bowling me over as he walked up. "Th' poin' isn't accuracy here, Astrid. It's strength. It doesn't mat'er where ye throw it, just that ye do."

"So what you're saying is," Tuffnut spoke up, "I could aim at Ruffnut's head and not get yelled at?"

Sometimes it was really really hard to remember that they were family.

"And I can aim mine at Tuffnut'sâ€"?"

Aaand other times it was impossible to forget that these guys were twins.

Gobber, like everyone else in the village, paid no mind to their ruthlessness to each other. The fact was, their bloodlust was something they'd gotten from their parents, who were both very proud of the pairâ€"the fact that it was usually aimed at one another just meant that they were competitive, had a constant outflow of aggression, and weren't too touchy-feely. All traits Vikings cherished.

I looked down at the hammer at my feet, and hesitated. Toughness was another thing Vikings held dear, but the idea of picking that thing up and flinging it around? With my arms still hurting the way they were? Didn't exactly appeal.

Fishlegs picked up the hammer next to mine, glancing at me. "I, uhâ€¦ I don't think it'll bite you, Hiccup."

"Um, yes, thanks, Fishlegs. I'd kinda figured that much out for myself." Our conversation got Astrid's attention, and when I saw her narrow her eyes at me, I swallowed. I couldn't make myself look like a fool next to herâ€"not more than usual.

Bracing myself, I let out a slow breath before stooping and wrapping my hands around the handle. Lifting with my knees and back took most of the pain out of my arms, but fire still burned down both of them, angry and red.

Swallowing any sound, I bent my arms and let the weight of the thing rest on my shoulderâ€"just holding it, now, I was able to let out a relieved breath. Better. Not great butâ€¦ less painful.

We spread out over the floor, an unspokenâ€"yet extremely loudâ€"competition for the most hits to the center of the floor beginning; "_poin' isn't accuracy_" be dam#ed.

Predictably, Snotlout was calling for Astrid to notice him while flexing his muscles, and she was completely ignoring him. The twins were on opposite sides of the Ring and stepping further back with each throw, trying to hit either the center or each otherâ€"it was impossible to tell which, because neither of them were hitting either target. Fishlegs, due to his immense size, kept throwing his hammer far, even if it kept angling to the left or right off the center.

I couldn't just stand here foreverâ€"I could already see Gobber raising an eyebrow at me, so I took a steadying breath.

I could do this. I was the son of the Chief, the grandson of-of a godâ€"the cousin of a _Night Fury_. A little pain was nothing. Nothing I couldn't handle.

Setting my jaw, I moved fast, hoping to get it over with quickly.

The hammer left my grip, and pain flared through my body like a Nadder's fire, hot and vengeful and _extreme_. My vision swam and blackened on the edges, and bile rose in my throat, and I focused sharply on _do not pass out in front of them. Do not pass out in front of them. Do not_â€"

"Was that your best shot?" Snotlout asked, his voice incredulous and joyful, the way a vulture was at seeing a carcass. I opened my eyes, and saw the hammer on the floor about three feet away from me. _Great_. _Daily quota for humiliation, achieved_. "That was justâ€"_beautiful!_"

Blood rushed to my face, which grew hot with shame whenâ€"oh gods, he started doing an _impression_. He limply dragged his hammer around, making faces like he needed to relieve himself badly, before putting effort into dropping it a few inches away.

"Whoa, that's really good!" Tuffnut commented on the performance.

"I know, I almost can't tell the difference!" Snotlout agreed,

grinning broadly.

"Yeah, you never were really good at counting IQ points," I muttered, telling myself I still had that much, still red in the face.

"Hey-hey guys! I'm Hiccup!" Ruffnut laughed. She let the head of her hammer hit the ground and struggled to lift it again. "_Oh no! It's too heavy! It must weigh five pounds!_" The laughter grew and I shrank back. "I'm Hiccupâ€"I set things on fire and I'm totally useless! I'll probably do us all a favor some day and trip off the edge of the world like the klutz I am!"

The words hit me worse than Toothless's flames did last night, and I flinched away.

"Ruffnut!"

Gobber's angry shout, however, was completely drowned out by the furious screeching that shook the doors of one of the cages.

HHHHHHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Every last one of us jumped away, stunned and alarmedâ€"until I saw that it was Slither and Tricky's cell. Confusion settled over me, of a slightly different kind than was crossing everyone else's.

They were probably wondering what could've set the dragon off like that; I could list a few things they were ticked off about, living in there, but why would they just now attack the door? They hadn't before, and though they weren't as articulate as Toothless, I knew they were probably smart enough to wait until they would at least not hear Vikings just outside if they were trying for an escape. I took half a step forward, before remembering that Viking trainees did not try to calm irate dragonsâ€"they tried to kill them.

It seemed like with every hour, that idea disgusted me more.

Gobber scowled and walked forward, swaying on his pegleg as always. "Oi, ye great dumb beastie!" he roared, reaching the door and kicking it. "Go back ta bed!"

I frowned, insulted on their behalf. Slither and Tricky had the last laugh, though, when suddenly, gas started leaking out from between the doors.

(I idly noticed it smelled a lot better this time around.)

Gobber's eyes grew enormous. "Duck 'n cover!" he shouted, spinning on his peg and sprinting away.

BOOM!

The door, used to this abuse, didn't budgeâ€"but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bjorn, carrying what looked like several hundred-pound sand bags, jump in fright at the sound and drop his load.

Almost in slow motion, I followed the path of the falling sacks,

down, through the grates of the Ring and towards the floorâ€|

â€|where they would land onâ€"and crushâ€"Ruffnut.

"Ruffnut, look out!" I screamed, and took off.

The tackle probably wasn't the cleanest, nor did it have the gentlest landing, but it got us both out of the way. The bags hit the ground with a disturbingly final _thump_.

Silence reigned over the Ring as every eye turned to us. I scrambled off of Ruffnut's chest, knowing that being in that position with a disinclined Viking girl led to pain, so much _pain_, but looked down at her.

Her eyes were wide, and her face was paleâ€"she was staring at the bags, probably in shock. Hopefully in shock; better that than actual hurt.

"Are you okay?" I asked, kneeling closer to her and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Ruffnut flinched away, turning her eyes on meâ€"wide and afraid, but I couldn't see any pain. I backed up a little, knowing a dangerous creature when I saw one (a Viking in shock was a soon-to-be-violent Vikingâ€| or at least, a more-violent-than-usual one), but keeping her in sight.

"Ruffnut!" Tuffnut shouted, sprinting across the Ring. I sidestepped, figuring this was more his area than mine. "Whoa, that thing nearly _flattened_ you! Too bad it didn't. That would've been so cool to watch!"

Or maybe it was more _anyone else's_ area than his. I was about to reach out to comfort when Ruffnut scowled and punched her brother in the face, knocking him to the ground. She smirked. "Huh, you're right. That _was_ fun to watch."

Then again, that seemed to work perfectly. I smiled a little and was about to turn to Slither and Tricky's cell when Fishlegs made me freeze.

"Whoa! That must've been like plus fifteen speed!"

Oh \$HIT!

Had he seen? Had _any_ of them seen? Terror from an instinct drilled into my head at a young age shattered through my entire body like ice. Every muscle turned to rock in pure, unadulterated panic. My eyes felt ready to pop out of my head. _Oh gods, oh gods, oh godsâ€|_

If anyone found out, if _anyone_ found outâ€"

"Ye lot always underestima'e 'im!" Gobber's hand was a _vice_ on my shoulder. I could feel the anger and disappointment seeping through it into me like boiling water, but I didn't care, because they were _buying it_ and relief was like warmth in my frozen veins. "Hicca here can move when it counts! Isn' tha' right, _Hicca_?"

I forced myself to chuckle. "Hehâ€"right! When it counts! I-I-I can be pretty fast, when, when it counts, you know?"

Before I had a chance to say anything else, he steered me away from the group, marching me through the Ring. "We're jus' gonna 'ave a word real quick about that. Ev'ryone else, back to work!"

A small amount of the fear returned, because I was in trouble. I was in _so much trouble._ And when we got to the tunnel, out of earshot of the others, and Gobber turned me around to face him, the look on his face told me just how _much_ trouble I was in.

* * *

><p>The whole group watched as Gobber marched Hiccup away from the main Ring and into the tunnel. Though the lighting was bad, it was pretty easy to make out the older blacksmith berating the chief's son, waving a finger in his face and shouting.<p>

Hiccup's shoulders rose in a familiar defensive posture, but he spoke back at first, gesturing into the Ring, towards the group.

"Isâ€| Hiccup getting yelled at for saving Ruffnut?" Fishlegs asked, looking confused.

"I didn't need saving!" Ruffnut said, sounding insulted. "I would've moved in time!"

"Well yeah, obviously he's getting yelled at for _that_," Tuffnut replied, ignoring his sister. "Hey Bjorn!" he called out, waving to the horrified thrall on top of the wall. "Work on your aim! Maybe you'll have better luck next time!"

That earned him another punch in the face. Ruffnut's color was rapidly returning with every hit she landed on her brother.

Astrid watched as Gobber's words made the scrawny boy hang his head in defeat. He said something and Gobber nodded, motioning out the tunnel. Before Hiccup could get out of the way, though, the trainer punched him lightly in the arm.

The expression of real pain on his face made her freeze and Gobber stop. She knew he was burnedâ€"but didn't Gobber? He worked at the forge with him, after all. She would have thought that he would've been aware of any accident he'd had.

A few words from the boy, and Gobber's face turned angrier than Astrid ever remembered seeing it. He waved his hammer arm in Hiccup's face, and she almost imagined she could hear him shouting.

Hiccup shrank away, and took the first opportunity he had to flee.

"Hah," Snotlout smirked. "Guess he managed to do _that_ wrong too!"

She frowned. The tackle _had_ been sloppyâ€"the memory of it made her winceâ€"but Hiccup, scrawny weakling _Hiccup_, had _saved_ Ruffnut. How could he have done that _wrong_?

Especially since he'd been so far away from her at the time. The kid had had to have moved fast. Freakishly fast, even. She didn't even see him, but that might've been because she was looking at the Zippleback's door.

Gobber came back to the group. "Didn' I tell you lo' to ge' back to work?" he asked, vestiges of anger still lacing his tone.

"Uh, sir?" Fishlegs spoke up. "Why were you angry at Hiccup? He saved Ruffnut's life."

"I didn't need saving!" Ruffnut snapped again.

"Yeahâ€"and why'd he get out of practice?" Snotlout demanded. "If the weakling getsâ€"

"Stupid boy's been 'idin' injuries," Gobber cut in, silencing them all. There wasn't much that Vikings considered more foolish than hiding injuriesâ€"sure, you were expected to tough out the pain while it counted, but wounds needed treatment. And if you went into battle at anything less than your best, because you were too proud to submit to Gothi's healing, there was a good chance someone would die, and then it'd be your fault. "He's seen Gothi, but he shouldn'a shown up fer practice. You all, 'oweever, still have work ta doâ€"pick up those hammers, we don' 'ave all day!"

Astrid grabbed the hammer at her feet, hauling it up. As she threw it, the Zippleback's door rattled againâ€"nothing as huge as it had been earlier, but still enough to show that the beast inside wasn't happy.

Good, she thought, scowling just at the thought of the reptile. They were the bane of Berk, and killing her first would be a time to remember.

Some back corner of her mind wondered what exactly had set the dragon off in the first place.

It's a dragon, Astrid reminded herself, shaking her head as she picked the hammer back up for another throw. It doesn't need to be set off, it's just a furious, vicious killer at heart.

She had seen Hiccup had taken a step towards it, when the door had started shaking. He'd been the one to scare it back, the day before yesterday, and she had been dying to know how he'd done itâ€"only for him to keep it secret from her! Told her that would be telling, treated her like a toddler! Him! The useless, scrawny little piece of Terror droppings had had the nerveâ€|

The next time she flung the hammer, she imagined his face was the target, and it hit exactly.

Her anger calmed a little bit after that, because the mental image of Hiccup with a black eye that appeared was both satisfying and brought up a strange sense of guilt.

She shook that off easily when she realized that, for that half second before the door had blown, she almost had read concern on his face. For the dragon!

Typical weak Hiccup. Feeling worried for a mindless destroyer that would use his bones as toothpicks.

That same corner of her mind, though, had one last thing to point out. As strange as it had seemed, the dragon had only started attacking the door after Ruffnut had made fun of Hiccup. Almost like it had been defending him.

She shook her head viciously to get the thoughts out. _That's ridiculous. It probably just heard her laughing and wanted her guts for dinner._

There was no way a _dragon_ had wanted to defend a _human_.

* * *

><p>Gobber had sentenced me to three hundred nails.

I did kinda deserve itâ€"but _not_ for using my powers! Yes, it had been in broad daylight. Yes, others had been around. But Ruffnut would've died if I hadn't gotten to her!

Maybe I _should've_ felt guilty for using them. But I didn't; I couldn't. I had to wonder if that made me a bad Viking, for not agreeing with my elders.

I already am a bad Viking, I remembered, and picked up my smithing hammerâ€"so much smaller and easier on my arms than those Thor-blasted war hammersâ€"again.

The reason I deserved the nails was because I'd been idiotic enough to not tell anyone about my arms. There wasn't anything Vikings thought more stupid than not admitting to an injury, and Gobber has always had a ratherâ€"explosive reaction to me hiding them.

Gobber was pretty easy-going about most things in life. I don't think it took him longer than a week to get accustomed either of his limbs being lost down a dragon's throat. But there were three things that he could _not_ handleâ€"one was my powers getting out.

But two was ignoring smith safety, and to explain the burns, I'd had to tell him I'd done forge work without my sleeves. That had, to put it very simply, _pissed him off_.

(The third thing that annoyed Gobber was scratchy underwear, but I tried not to think about that, for my own sanity.)

He'd _also_ given me the lecture that was usually Dad's area, since he was off-island. About how I had to be careful, no one could ever find out, for any reason, because there was little to no doubt I'd be shipped off.

See, we knew there was no way anyone else would believe I was the grandson of Thor. I mean, c'monâ€"how could Thor's seed, no matter how far down the line, produce something as scrawny and weak as a hiccup? More likely, they'd say that I was the son of Loki, or even Loki _himself_, or something else from another Realm, come to rain destruction down on Berkâ€"like I'd almost managed weekly, for the last ten years.

There was no precedent for something like that happening, so the village would probably fall back on the traditional response to anything they don't understandâ€”maim it, kill it, tie it to a burning ship and send it off the edge of the world. All of which they would do to me, with little hesitation, and none of which sounded like a fun time for me.

These people had been my family for my entire life. Even if they didn't exactly appreciate myâ€”| affect on the infrastructure of Berk during raids, they were my aunts and unclesâ€”had taught me how to dress myself, cook, which plants were poisonous and which were good to eat, since I didn't have Mom to teach me that and Dad was busy chieftaining. Even now, they didn't all rally to kill me off as dead weightâ€”they just told me to stay inside, get out from underfoot. They did care.

They say it took a village to raise a kidâ€”and mine _had_ raised meâ€”but even so, I lived in constant fear of them, because I knew, the moment I was revealed as something _more_, something _different_, that would be it for me. Berk would turn its back on me in a way it hadn't yet; in a way I didn't think I could really stand seeing it.

And even if they _didn't_ choose to ship me off, everything would still change if people learned about... my lineage. Being Æsmegir isn't something you can know about someone and just brush off, like a hair color. It changes your perception of that person. I really _don't_ want anyone to judge or respect me just for a title and bloodline-I get enough of that with "Chief's Son", much less "Thor's grandson"-and my village being scared of me or only respecting me to my face is the _last_ thing I want.

On top of wanting to not be shipped off, I want to be worthy of my titles-Hope and Heir, and Æsmegir both-because my _own_ actions. Hiccup the Useless is bad, but Hiccup the Kid Who Tried to Claim Thor's Parentage or Hiccup the Grandchild of the Gods would be worse, because it's not even really _me._ So my lineage is a secret.

Nail two hundred and forty-four went into the bucketâ€”once I was done, if there was enough time before dragon training began, I planned to run back to the cove to visit Toothless.

Maybe _he'd_ know why Slither and Tricky had gone crazy like thatâ€”|

Gobber had also asked me about them, incidentally. About what had happened in the Ring two days ago. He'd thought it had meant I was beginning to be more like _family_, which was also why he'd thought it a good idea to bring me in for practice this morning.

By _family_, he'd meant Dad, and Thor. Like the village. Vikings, big, strong, and tough. Unafraid to stand up to what terrified them. And something like shame curled in my heart, around the realization that that would never be me.

But then I'd turned my thoughts to Toothlessâ€”also family. Lithe, hidden, and snarky. Smaller than any but the tiniest dragons, but more than able to rely on his intelligence to survive and thrive.

If Gobber knew just how much like family I wasâ€¦ I'd just told him instead that maybe they were able to smell Å†sir blood in me, and he'd taken that, thankfully.

"_Midday!"_

The familiar, grating voice made me stop working for a moment. Lardstongue, the village time-keeper, had been calling the hours for longer than even my dad had been aliveâ€”his name's actually Sven, but with Silent Sven and Hairy Sven also running around, the village gave him a different name. Lardstongue referred to the fact that years upon years of screaming had made the muscles in his mouth big, and his tongue was hugely fat with constant usage.

"Done!" I said cheerfully, throwing the rod and the three-hundredth nail into the bucket to cool and damping the fire.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like I'd be able to visit Toothlessâ€”an hour at best wasn't enough, not if we actually wanted to get anything done concerning flight, but it would translate into a very, very nice nap.

* * *

><p>I know a few of you were curious and a little frustrated as to why he hides his Gifts, so hopefully this answered that. If you still have questions, or if you see a plothole (those dread beasts!) please let me know!

Oh, by the way: the names Slither and Tricky are, one, not mine—they belong to Star-Struck Inu, who has a wonderful fic entitled **Mein Vollkommener BeschÅ¼tzer which is epic, awesome, and amazingly written; and two, obviously not the names given the dragon in the series and movies. But that doesn't mean they'll stay different. ;)***

Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

~Tibki

11. Chapter 11

Hey y'all.

Does this font look smaller than usual to you? It does to me, but my window might just be zoomed out...

RIP Robin Williams. You will be sorely missed, My Captain.

Anyway. Hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER ELEVEN_

When I showed up at the Ring for the training that afternoon, something otherworldly happened: Gobber actually turned me away.

The reception to that was mixed. "Finally, someone has enough brains to get him out of here!" Snotlout crowed, the look on his face vicious and delighted. Astrid, strangely, didn't look entirely unhappy herselfâ€"she wouldn't easily forgive me for keeping my secret to success a secret I think. She glared at me (something that would become a trend over the next few weeks), which was really weird and kind of a depressing thing, coming from the one person who'd never spoken against me before.

"Waitâ€"practice and then this? Why does he get a whole day off and we don't?" Tuffnut demanded.

"Yeah, that's not fair!" Ruffnut agreed. "We're almost half as destructive as he is!"

I winced, but couldn't really deny it. As much as the twins loved to create chaos and wreak havoc on the village, I still had the top place for most buildings destroyed, right under the dragons. It was the fire thing. And the clumsy thing. And both put together. A lot.

Gobber slapped the flat of his false handâ€"today, a wicked-sharp spear-end that made me swallow in fear, even though it wasn't going to be used against meâ€"on my back. "Well, even if his injuries aren't enough to bar him from trainin', Hicca here 's been doin' th' best out of all o' ye, an' so has deserved a day off."

That confused me, because that was a whole load of yak droppings. Apart from the whole thing with the Zippleback, I knew that I was in dead last, and even if I had been doing well, there was no way in any of the Nine Realms Gobber would give me a day off because of it.

Gobber was the kind of teacher who pushed someone to their limits and then beyond it, constantly. It was a good technique, if only slightly less destructive to the human body as his learning-on-the-job technique had been to the forge when I was little. But to be honest, his non-stop pushing and the way he relentlessly dragged me into the forge before dawn every morning was half the reason I was as good a smith as I am. So him giving a day off to the "best" trainee?

Not Frigg-loving likely.

The other trainees looked just as baffled as I was, andâ€"gods, Astrid looked insulted. Then again, I couldn't blame her. Taking Gobber's words as truth, I'd apparently usurped her running streak of being the best for three golden days in a row, with my own one shining moment.

Clapping my on the shoulder, Gobber hobbled past me. "Alrigh'â€"ev'yone grab yer shields an' weapons. We're goin' up the mountain, ta see the Scauldron t'day!"

As Tuffnut started to complain about the hikeâ€"and Fishlegs started going off about the dragon itselfâ€"everything made sense to me.

The Scauldron was a _Tidal_-class dragon, if I remembered the book right. A water dragon, and I'd heard stories about the stranded one, in a closed but extremely deep pool halfway up Helga's Peak.

Gobber knew, like he knew everything else about me, that I couldn't swim. Taking on a water dragon would be a very easy and very quick way for me to die—or at least, have part of my secret revealed.

Thank Oñ in in Asgarñ for his thinking ahead.

I breathed an exhausted sigh of relief as the other teens walked away from the Ring without me, and then perked up. A day off meant I could spend the entire afternoon with Toothless! Of course, with the others so close by, we couldn't risk flying for fear of being seen, but any chance to see my draconic cousin was worth taking.

He still needed breakfast, too. No doubt he was worried about what had kept me, in the morning.

Smiling, I turned on my heel and went to grab a basket of fish from the storehouse.

* * *

><p>"Oh Toothless!"

***"H**iccup**!"**

The moment he heard my voice, Toothless shot forward from his dark corner of the cove and tackled me to the ground, scratching his tongue over my face frantically. Laughing, I tried to push him off, as unsuccessful as ever—he had he put his full weight on me, he would've probably broken every last bone in my body, so even with him just keeping me between his forelegs, there was no chance of me shoving him away.

***"Y**eah—he yeah, I missed you too, bud, now—he urgh, get _off_ me**!"** I laughed, pushing on his face, too happy to even register any pain from my arms. ***"W**hat's with the big hello**?"**

Toothless moved away, and gave me a glare once I was able to sit up and wipe most of the dragon spit off my face. I'd thought it weird the first few times he'd done that, but not anymore—he it was just something dragons did with their aeries, I guessed. Like cats, grooming one another. Really intelligent, really really big, cats.

(I hoped and prayed he never expected me to return the favor. That would just be too much.)

***"W**here in fire's name have you been, you little _flame_**?"** he demanded sharply, a corner of his mouth lifting in a growl. ***"W**hy didn't you come this morning**?"**

I smirked, using a sleeve to clean my mouth off before answering. ***"A**w, Toothless, did you miss me**?"**

The dragon huffed. ***"M**ore like I missed my breakfast. Is that what

you've got on your back**?"**

I rolled my eyes but dutifully shrugged off the basket, carefully hiding the wince as it dragged on my arms. Apparently, I didn't manage it, because Toothless's eyes softened in concern. I smiled at him and kicked the basket over, spilling the fish over the ground. **"I**'m alright**,"** I assured him.

After giving me a look-over to make certain, Toothless dug in eagerly, and I fought off a twinge in my stomach at the sight. I was his only method of finding food, and I'd taken my sweet time getting here today. Mentally, I swore to drop by every morning at sunset, even if it meant being late for any ill-advised practice Gobber forced me into, even if it meant waking early after a night in the forge.

"So**,"** I said, settling down beside the basket. The smell of fresh-caught fish was one I was starting to get used toâ€"not one I enjoyed, still, but I didn't gag at it anymore, after bringing so much of it to Toothless everyday. ****"I don't think we're gonna be able to go up flying today, bud**."** Toothless looked up, his eyes wide. **"S**orry, but Gobber and the others are on the mountain, and you're a lot easier to spot during the day than at night**."**

Toothless huffed, but I knew he understood when he just snapped up another cod in reply. **"W**hy aren't you with them**?"** he asked, once he'd swallowed. **"A**nd for that matter, were _they_ why didn't you show up this morning**?"**

I nodded, leaning back on the basket. The day wasn't as clear or bright as it could've been, but the sun was still peeking through the clouds and, like any sane Viking, I was planning on soaking up as much warmth from it as possible before winter hit.

"They're working on a Scauldron right now, and deep water isn't exactly the best idea for me**." **Toothless grumbled seriously at the understatement. **"A**s for this morning, Gobber thought it'd be a good idea to bring me in for practice with the others**."** I yawned harshly, still tired despite my nap. **"H**e figured, after I did so well with the Zippleback, that I'd be up to more physical work**."**

Toothless snorted. **"Y**ou? Physical work? You might as well ask a Fire-Skin to live in the water**."** It had taken me a while to interpret which species of dragon he meant whenever he referred to othersâ€"this one was a Monstrous Nightmare, to Vikings. At the same time, I was teaching him the Norse names for the same species. **"W**hat happened with theâ€| Zippleback? That was when you found out about your speaking to other dragons, right? That didn't take physical work, did it**?"**

Nodding, I leaned onto my side, picked up a stick, and started drawing shapeless images in the sand. **"N**ope, Gobber's just too optimistic for a Viking. I growled at them, and scared them back with an eel**."** Toothless shuddered and I sent him a small, guilty smile. **"T**he others thought it was impressive. They don't know I went back that night to get the eel out and apologize**."**

Toothless seemed to frown into his breakfast before he looked up at me. **"Why do you do this training?"** he asked.

The question caught me off-guard. **"Uhâ€¦ wellâ€¦"** I blushed and shrugged, holding the stick aside for a moment and picking at the grass with the same hand. **"Dad made me promise, andâ€¦ well, everyone my age in the village has to go through it."** I waved the stick in his direction. **"Why ask? You yourself said it was a good idea."**

Toothless bowed his head. **"Yeah, I did. But I said it was a good idea on the squish's part. That doesn't explain _your_ motives."**

"Well, I can't go back on the deal I made with Dad."

"A deal?" Toothless repeated, intrigued. **"What's his side of the deal?"**

I'd wondered the same thing, when I agreed to it, honestly. **"Well, uhâ€¦ I dunno. That I'd beâ€¦ accepted? Seen of as a Viking?"** I glanced off to the side. **"That he won't be embarrassed to have me as a son?"**

The last was under my breath, not really meant to be heard by himâ€¦or anyone, really. Granted, everyone knew about it (several visiting tribes and their heirs had almost openly referred to me as Stoick's little embarrassment) but we didn't really mention it aloud, on Berk. If I were a dragon, I'd call it the balance to the similarly un-mentioned grandson-of-a-god thing.

Unfortunately, Toothless heard me anyway. I was learning the hard way that there were little dragons didn't hear. He looked up and growled lowly. **"A sire who finds no pride in his offspring doesn't deserve to have any offspring at all."**

He had no way of knowing it, but with one sentence, Toothless managed to cross one of my very, very few lines.

My dad and I don't have the best relationshipâ€¦anyone with eyes and/or ears could tell you thatâ€¦and the two of us together were a bit of a sore subject, but I always defended him whenever someone made the rare comment about his leading abilities.

Contrary to popular belief, I did have a few good memories of my dadâ€¦and almost every last one of them involved him sitting down in his best chair after a hard day of chiefting, holding one or three ice blocks to his aching head. When that happened, I'd pour him a mug of beer from the tapped barrel kept especially in the back of the house and listen to him talk about his day.

They may call me uselessâ€¦they might argue that I'll never be chiefâ€¦but no one could say that there was anything easy about chiefting, or that I didn't know anything about the struggles of leading. There were lines on my dad's face that cropped up over the last few months alone, just from stress, and he was pretty much holding the village together by himself.

Call me what you will, say what you want about me in the future, but no one bad-talks my dad in the present.

Defensive anger grew, and I sat up. **"H**ey**!"** I barked, eyes narrowed, surprising him. **"M**y dad's the greatest chief Berk has _ever_ seen**."**

"And obviously blind as well**,"** Toothless replied, frowning.

"To what, exactly?" **"**** I snapped, still tired and unwilling to deal with this. **_My_ dad?** Head of the Hooligans and leader of more than 250 warriors? **_Blind_?** **"T**o his people?** He goes out into the village to help them every day! To the lack of food on the island this winter? He pulled men off the main defense to form hunting parties so we won't all starve! Dad **_himself_** is off trying to find the Nest so the raids'll stop! **_How_** does any of that relate to him being **_blind_**? He sees problems and he tries to fix them, that's-that's like the opposite of blind**"**!**"

"He's blind to his own son, obviously**,"** Toothless returned, starting to sound frustrated. **"I**f he can't see what's right in front of his face**."**

"There's nothing _to_ see**!"** I bit back with a growl. **"H**e deserves someone big and tough, who'll be able to lead after he's gone**!"**

"And why wouldn't _you_ be able to lead**?"** Toothless snapped, his eyes narrowing. **"B**ecause you're small and not physically strong? A leader doesn't need to be able to throw axes and hammers, the best leaders aren't decided by the sharpness of tooth or clawâ€"it's by their intelligence, the way they _protect_ their flock**!"**

His voice nearly cracked on the word **_protect_**, but I didn't much care. **"Y**eah, _flock_â€"not tribes! That is _not_ how Viking chiefs work! You have to be big, strong, and unmovable**!"**

Toothless stood and showed his teeth in a growl. **"A** stubborn pine will get blown down by the wind. If your sire is as _big, strong, and unmovable_ as you say good squish chiefs are, then he is destined to fall tooâ€"**!"**

(I'd never before tried to punch anyone. But after so long trying to shoot one down, it would figure that my first target would be a Night Fury.)

Toothless probably didn't even feel itâ€"those scales are tough, and my arms are not, especially while still injuredâ€"but the fact that I'd actually tried to **_hurt_** him stunned him still.

"You don't know anything! _Anything!_ About my father! He is the best Viking on Berk! And by all rights he should've killed me the moment I was born! _I'm_ the one who doesn't deserve _him**!**_**"**

Louder than anything else I'd ever heard, it echoed through the cove, rebounding back on us. Like it had poured out of me with the words, the anger burning in my stomach vanished, leaving me empty and shaking.

My knees wobbled, but I set my jaw and locked them under me, turning my head away from Toothless. I could feel a wet track down my cheek, where a single tear had fallenâ€”I wasn't going to embarrass myself or my father further, by collapsing.

I'd never told anyone that. Ever. Angry, at myself now, for admitting it and for crying like a baby, I wiped at my face furiously, trying to stem the flow.

Toothless's warm, black face nudged into my side with a wordless, questioning sound. I glanced over and saw his toxic eyes, sad and open and confused. Sniffing once, I eased my hand into the soft spot behind his earsâ€”the warm touch of scales calmed and centered me, so I opened my mouth, starting to explain.

I**~I don't. I don't deserve him, becauseâ€”| My-my mom died giving birth to me**, " I said, my voice hoarse and soft. ***"A**nd we're Vikings, weâ€”we look for signs, during births and deaths. When I was born, there was a storm, and a flood, and an eclipse, and then my momâ€”| that should've been enough to convince my dad to leave me out for the gods to deal with, and along with my size? I was tinier then than I am now, if you can believe it. Runtsâ€”| hiccups are usually abandoned in the woods, for the wolves and dragons to take**. **

D**ad should've left me out there. I've heard people ask himâ€”why'd you let the boy survive? _He won't be anything more than a burden on the village. He'll be worthless, won't be able to pull his own weight._ Useless. Hiccup, the Useless. But he didn't. He loved me too much, he ignored them all and raised me as best as he could. For all the good it did**. "

I shook my head and took a careful breath, looking up at the afternoon sky. ***S**ometimes I think he should'veâ€”| should've just left me out there. That would've saved the village a lot of grief, and not exactly just a couple explosions. But since he didn'tâ€”| since he didn't, I'm going to prove myself. I'm going to be a Viking, one Dad can be proud of, not embarrassed about. I'm going to be the son he deserves, as the Chief and as the man who saved me**. **

A**nd my dad isn't blind. Sometimes he doesn't listen, butâ€”| he sees me for what I am right now. ** I swallowed and looked at the ground. ***W**hen I went into that Ring for the first time, and started training, I went because I wanted to prove myself, or even make myself, into a real Viking. Right now, there isn't anything in me worth seeing, but maybe one day I'll be that strong warrior he deserves. One day, I'll be able to do things that the son of the Chief, the g-grandson of Thor, should be able to do. One dayâ€”| they won't call me the Useless. They'll accept me**. ***

Maybe it was the fact that I knew he couldn't tell anyone else about what I was saying, or maybe it was because we were family, or maybe it was just that he was the one here when the floodgates opened, but every word came from the darkest corners of my mind, the deepest pits of my heart. It wasn't anything I'd ever admit elsewhere, and I somehow knew the words would never pass my lips again. It was too close to the chest, too personal. Wincing, I realized that me saying things like that only proved my unVikingnessâ€”no

self-respecting Viking would ever open up and admit _feelings_ like this.

Toothless, for his part, looked thoughtful once I finished. I found myself thanking Thor that he wasn't any of the other teens, or Gobber or Dadâ€"all of whom would've either ridiculed, punched, pitied, or have been disappointed in me, respectively, in reply.

He turned his head. I followed his gaze as he swung his tail forward, the prosthesis still swinging freely on the oiled-daily bearings.

T**his, Cousin**, he began, and the word made me pause. _Squish_ was his most common name for me, followed by Hiccup and sometimes _little flame_, when he was starting to get ticked off at meâ€"but _Cousin_, he only used rarely. ***T**his was not made by Useless hands. Dragons are superior to squishes in almost every way, but we do admit one faultâ€"we don't have your _hands_. Our fire lets us be pretty good at destroying, but we can't _create_, not like you can**.***

He pulled his head away from my palm, then nosed my fingers. ***Y**our sire, your entire flock, judges you on your inability to destroy like they destroy. For some reason, _you_ do the sameâ€"think you're worthless, because you can't do as they do and take lives with ease. Since you think like they do, you, Cousin, are just as blind as they are**.***

The words should've insulted me, and maybe did, to some extent, but his soft words and touch took away any of the hurt and made me keep listening. ***Y**ou're all blind, Squish, because you can't see the even greater gift the gods have given you, the thing that makes you _special_. Your village destroys, but you _create_â€"that isn't an ability the gods allow every creature. It makes you different from the others, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. If you hadn't had the ability to make, you would've never brought me down, and we would never have met**.***

Toothless pulled back, his gaze serious but happy. ***T**hatâ€"whatever you built, let me find my aerie. You built my tail, and allowed me to fly again. I can call your sire blind, Hiccup, because he can't see the beauty and good in what you do with your hands, just because it's not the same as what he does with his. And _you_ need to stop judging your own abilities on what others can do**.*** He twitched his head to his back, the saddle and the tail. ***C**ould any of your friends, or your father, make half of this? Are they less because they can't? Are you less because you _can_**.***

Entranced, I hesitatingly shook my head and he nodded once, seriously. ***W**e dragons cherish different species for what they can do, for what's especially theirs. Zipplebacks for their stealth, Stone-Swallowers for their ability to change direction in flight, and me forâ€"well, everything**.***

His pride broke through the trance his words had put me under, and I snorted. Toothless gave me a smile at the sound. ***I** know I shouldn't expect too much from other squishes, but you've proven yourself to be at least not half as dull as the others, so _you're_ another story. You, Squish, will learn to accept your own Gifts for

what they are, or else**."**

I couldn't help myself. **"O**r else what**?"** I asked, smiling lightly. I wasn't sure how, but the egotistical dragon had made me feelâ€| better.

"Or else, this."

Toothless shot forward and dragged his tongue over my face again._

"Oh, _ew_**!"** I jumped away. **"C**'mon! I just got dried off**!"** Despite my words, I was laughing. **"T**oothless**!"**

The Night Furyâ€"dam# lizardâ€"sat back and smiled, smug and content.

* * *

><p>The sound of a shrill, distinctive ROAR made everything by Scauldron's Pool freeze in place.

It only continued, echoing and joining with a _second_ pitch, reverberating through the entire mountain.

"Is thatâ€|?" Astrid asked, her eyes wide.

"Night Fury," Fishlegs whispered, terror making his voice tremble.

The Scauldron itself shuddered and dove with a splash, disappearing down into the depths of the pool. They watched it go, dread growing in their stomachs.

"I've _never_ heard that sound during the daytime," Fishlegs continued, holding his hammer close to his chest.

"What do you think it means?" Astrid wondered.

"I dunno, maybe someone woke it up from its nap," Tuff suggested. Ruffnut rolled her eyes and smacked his helmet with her spear.

"Wha' it means is, we need ta ge' back ta th' village," Gobber put in, watching their surroundings with sharp eyes. "'T's no' safe up 'ere, an' if tha' thing decides to come down, we need ta be ready to 'elp defend the town."

Snotlout snorted. "Guess Useless _didn't_ bring that thing down after all. I knew it."

With a quintessentially Viking mixture of terror and excitement for battle running through them, the group packed up and headed down the mountain, unaware of the two cousins laughing and chasing one another around in cove some hundreds of yards just to their east.

* * *

><p>"Isn't the world a _wonderful_ place, Cousin**?"**

Trying to hold in a grin, I nodded vigorously. **"O**h, definitely**."**

Trader Johann, the only merchant brave enough to sail this far north, once told a story about something called opium. Civilizations to the south sold and traded it and the flowers it came from at huge costs, and traders who could get their hands on it were made rich quickly.

Apparently, this opium had a weird affect on peopleâ€"made them happy, lethargic, content, less likely to feel anger over anything. People would have entire parties where they'd eat tons of the stuff and just lay around, laughing at nothing and enjoying the hallucinations dancing in front of their eyes.

We'd been terrified. Something that made people less bloodthirsty? How could the gods have ever created such a thing! My dad had made me swear, that night, that if I ever became chief, I'd turn away any boat carrying the stuff.

(It was one of my best memories; if I ever became chief was a whole lot better than the half-understood, never-really-stated Snotlout'll probably become chief and then gods help us all.)

Johann had said that the southern people called the affect opium had a high. Well, Toothless and I had certainly gone high today; him more so than me.

The plant was goatweed, and my 27-foot long, one-ton scaly cousin, a sleek, deadly predator with immense firepower and the sharpest teeth I'd ever seen, was rolling around a field of the stuff, purring and snarling in pure elation, every inch a happy kitten and puppy in one body.

"Ooooooh, that smells so good**!*_**"** he yowled. He'd already made a large, flat circle in what had once been an unbroken field of tall plantsâ€"I had a feeling that he wouldn't ever leave, given the choice.

"I'll bet it does, bud**."** I grinned, thoroughly enjoying the sight of the normally proud and sarcastic Night Fury rolling around like a toddler.

"Likeâ€"like flying and heaven and the ocean and _oooooh_**!"**** He twisted, flattening out more of the goatweed, and I idly wondered if his wings were feeling a little crushed under his weight. **"I** love the world! Isn't it a wonderful place**?"****

"You already said that, Toothless**."**

"I love a world with this-this-this _stuff_ in it**!"**** he crowed.

"It's called goatweed. And I love a world where I can see things like this every once in a while**,"**** I replied, shaking my head. I picked a few stems and sniffed them myself.

The world tilted around me and I nearly stumbled over. A strange, traveling tingle brought up goosebumps on my skinâ€"the only reason I didn't succumb to an equally strange calm just on my horizon was

because goosebumps on burns? Not enjoyable.

Hissing in pain, I pulled the grass away from my nose. **"That stuff's stronger than I thought it would be"**

I opened up my notebook and pressed a few of the leaves into it, sitting down as Toothless continued rolling around and shouting praises to the gods for their wonderful, heavenly construction of goatweed.

Goatweed"this stuff seems to completely alter their minds! I've never seen Toothless this happy or pliable? I think, with enough of this around, I could actually make him a crown of raven feathers and he'd wear it and agree to march around Berk in it.

Also some affect on humans; not nearly as strong as on Toothless, though. Thank the gods.

I looked at the grass again, thoughtful. Would it work on dragons other than Night Furies?

Dragging him away was a feat in and of itself, and made harder by the fact that we had to walk back rope-to-human-foot? Worked about just as well as I expected rope-to-dragon-foot to go.

Once we got back to the cove, I stayed with him, watching with a smile as he continued to romp around like a kid, splashing into the water and lolling his tongue as he rolled in the warm sun. Eventually, he fell asleep and while he was snoring, I thought about my next plan for his fin, some, but mostly just about him.

It was amazing, to me, how much had happened over the space of gods, had it really only been four days? Four days since I'd fired the Mangler (a memory that now made bile surge in my stomach, especially when the name had ended up being so apt), four days since I'd brought Toothless down, four days to change so much about my life

I'd never had real family before. The village had been fine, alright, they'd been okay, to me, in all honesty, but they still weren't family, they weren't blood. I didn't care about blood when it came to Germdish, but while Petri was close to me as a kid, he was still nearly fifteen years older than me. And at this point, I refused to count 'cousin' Snotlout. It had always just been me and my dad, and though I would never admit it aloud, that often meant it was just me.

But Toothless and I it had been immediate, just a quick and solid snick, the way two halves of a broken sword would fit together before repairing. I don't know whether it was because of the thing in my chest (which still hummed and sometimes even moved when he was around) or just something between us, a lock opened by the key of trading sarcasm and arrogance, but honestly? I didn't much care.

Because now, I did have someone an aerie of my own.

* * *

><p>So the "See You Tomorrow" sequence is half-finished-the rest will be up tomorrow.
**

Hope you liked it! Tell me if you see _any_ problems, please!

PEACE,

~Tibki

12. Chapter 12

Hey y'all!

Here's basically the rest of _See You Tomorrow_. Hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWELVE_

(As it turned out, other dragons _were_ affected by the goatweed. The Gronkle I tried it on looked pretty extremely happy to have it scratched on her nose.)

Over the next few weeks, I never really forgot what Toothless said, about my own abilities and the village. How just because what I did was different, it didn't mean that it was _bad_, or that I was worthless or useless. The idea made me thinkâ€"also, incidentally, something pretty unVikinglyâ€"and think hard. Toothless had questioned my motives for joining dragon training, and now I was too. Why was I coming back every day? Was it because I wanted to impress the village, or prove myself to my father?

It took a few days of thought, but with every new dawn and every hour I spent with the single soul on Berk who didn't expect me to prove my worthiness, it was becoming more and more clear.

I didn't reallyâ€| _care_ about impressing the village, anymore. Like, at all. And yes, I wanted my dad proud of me, butâ€| but could he be proud of _me_, when, honestly, his idea of a great Viking teenager was a slightly more intelligent _Snotlout_?

That last realizationâ€"that being proud of a Snotlout-copy wasn't really being proud of _me_â€"took me a few weeks, and it was made alongside the understanding that I wasn't coming to dragon training every afternoon in order to make anyone proud anymore. I was going for my own reasons, now.

Ironically enough, it was over those same few weeks that people started coming to watch us in the Ringâ€"watch _me_ in the Ring! Me! They _cheered_ when the goatweed-ed Gronkle fell on its side, content and barely conscious, cheered _me!_

I'd never been cheered before.

I'd barely ever been _acknowledged_ before.

(Well. For something positive.)

Now, a month ago, it would have been a heady feelingâ€”acceptance, pride, other people not looking down on me. A few weeks ago, it would've filled me up like warmed yak milk, settling into my bones and lifting my heart and shoulders until I would've felt like I could fly.

But now? When I'd actually flown, in little snippets, a few feet over the ground? When I've had a taste of what flight could really be like, amongst the clouds, and when I had someone who never thought twice about what I could or couldn't do, sitting in the cove and waiting for me every day?

Their cheers, their happiness, felt good to me. But it wasn't the life-changing experience I'd been expecting.

I'd already had a life-changing experienceâ€”when a black dragon put his nose into my palm for the first timeâ€”and I think it might've ruined any other I could have ever had.

And even though I didn't even care for it much anymore, every day I found myself with more, dare I say it, popularityâ€”people in the village would smile and wave at me as I walked by, and the other trainees would start to try and follow me around after training finished, asking questions and pestering one another as usualâ€”even Snotlout started acting more civil towards me!

After what had happened with Ruffnut and the sandbags in the Ring, Tuffnut had come up and actually started talking to me. Mostly insults and bringing upâ€”fond memories of how much of the village I had destroyed at any one time, but still, he was acknowledging me. It wasn't something I had been entirely certain he was capable of until that point, so I was a bit shocked, and more so when I realized what he was saying.

Tuffnut was thanking me. For saving Ruffnut. Vikings like the Thorstons never went for the mushyâ€”they went for the tough, and when they wanted to show respect, they simply pointed out what they believed meant you'd earned it. The twins were massive fans of destruction, so Tuff, in his roundabout, violent way, was complimenting meâ€”thanking me.

(It took me a solid three days of confusion and a little resentment at his digging up bad memories, plus a hint from Gobber, to figure it out. But in my defenseâ€”who in all nine OÃ°in-blessed Realms thinks like that? That mentioning your failures would be a sign of respect? At least Ruffnut had enough sanity to just never use the word 'Useless' ever again!)

Fishlegs, oddly enough, seemed almost desperate to get my attention at times; remembering how I felt in his shoes made me guilty, but the fact was, between flying and spending time with Toothless, having to dodge the villagers, getting enough sleep at night, and struggling to bring in what fish I could to make up for the baskets I kept stealing, I didn't have time to talk with him.

Everyone kept telling me how happy they were that I'd finally outgrown my oddness, that I was becoming one of them. When I walked

into the Great Hall and went to my table, they were the ones who came to me!

After so long, they wereâ€| accepting me.

I didn't stick around to enjoy it. I was having far too much fun enjoying myself elsewhereâ€"in the cove, in the woods and mountains of Berk, basically anywhere as long as Toothless was next to me.

I made so many discoveries over those few weeks, and they all went into the Dragon Manual, after being used in training. Goatweed was just the beginningâ€"dragons loved being scratched, and their scales were interestingly high-maintenance. Toothless had complained to me one day about how he was starting to get dull (prompting a solid half-hour snark-fest over his intelligence, of course), and now I spent every sunset, after new attempts at flying, rubbing him down with a lump of pumice, a kind of boiling-mountain rock that my southern uncle had given me, and scratching at his scales.

That was also how I found out that scratching them in one specific spot knocked dragons out cold. Toothless had (terrifyingly) taken hours to wake up, and the same had worked when I tried it on the Nadderâ€"the poor thing was actually pretty colorless and mistreated, like Slither and Tricky, and, when it came close to me in the Ring, was probably given the shock of its life when I didn't just smell like Night Fury, but had muttered to it soothingly as I scratched it into unconsciousness.

(That same Nadder, who refused to let me name her in a fit of injured pride, became a little more forgiving when I started burnishing her scales too. She's actually a pretty vain dragon.)

((The naming thing was actually a bit more complicated than you'd think, by the wayâ€"there's a whole tradition behind it, and yeah, dragons had traditions! Names were kept between aeries, but it was more than that: asking for a name or giving one was essentially an invitation to become aerie. That was why Toothless had eventually accepted my name for him, because we were aerie.))

((That being said, he wasn't too impressed when I told him about Slither and Tricky, because now he was randomly related to a Zippleback he'd never even met.)))

All through those weeks, the village cheered me on because they thought I was finding my calling, that I was becoming a true Viking in the training arena. And honestly, they were kinda right. I was finding my calling, but it wasn't what they thought it was.

They thought my reason for walking into the Ring everyday, with a smile on my face, was to learn to fight and kill dragons.

I walked into the Ring everyday, grinning brightly, eager to just learn about them.

* * *

><p>Training had been going on for almost a month and a half before I really realized how much time was passing. The winds were chillier than they had been, light and quick, carrying the gentle heat of summer away and leaving a warning that Winter was still on the

horizonâ€”and, not long behind it, Devastating Winter, which would effectively shut down the entire island for weeks at a time.

Hunting parties and fishing boats were being sent out with an almost desperate air, and even I, brows meeting in concentration, started rationing out what fish I ate myself, and what I brought Toothless every morning. There were a few days where my stomach growled, either in training or with Toothless, but I managed to ignore it or make enough noise for my scaly cousin to not notice.

It helped to remember what we'd accomplished or done together, to get my mind off my stomach. For instanceâ€”that morning, I'd made the discovery that Toothless really couldn't help himself if something shiny moved fast past him. He was like a giant cat, going after the reflection of sunlight on my hammer, and it had been hilarious to watch and tease him for!

â€”Up until he sat on me in retaliation.

Wincing, I rotated my shoulder to ease the bruising. Toothless, as great as he was, didn't know his own weight sometimes. "You alright, Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked from my right.

I sent him a smile, thinking fast. "Uh, yeahâ€”tripped yesterday, in the woods."

That was a pretty typical answer for a notorious, self-admitted klutz; Tuffnut sniggered, and Astrid snorted. "At least some things don't change," she muttered. I blushed red and held my shield closer to my body.

"Meet th' Terrible Terror!" Gobber suddenly called, once again above us in the spectator's seat. This time, though, he wasn't aloneâ€”half of the village that hadn't gone with my father to search for the Nest was watching too, murmuring amongst themselves and looking eager. There really was nothing Vikings loved more than throwing their children to the dragons.

Literally.

With the pull of a lever, the massive log on top of the door in front of us started rising. I saw Snotlout tense, his hands tightening over the sword, and, nervous, I swallowed too. How big was this thing?

The door that opened wasâ€”small.

And the Terrible Terror wasâ€”smaller. Maybe the size of a small terrier or a large cat, it had a round head like a Zippleback and a long body like a Nightmare, green and reddish-brown with spiraling black horns. A long tongue slapped out and licked its yellow eyeâ€”strange, but it was in better shape than most of the bigger dragons I'd met. Actually, it was kind of adorable.

'_Adorable_' wasn't a word in most Vikings' vocabulary, though. "Hah!" Tuffnut laughed, pointing at it with the hand not holding his spear. "It's like the size of myâ€”"

(I never thought I'd say this, but thank Thor the dragon attacked,

because I really did not want to know what the end of that sentence was.)

The group scattered as the spectators laughed, none of them and all of us surprised by the sudden ferocity. It slammed into Tuffnut, grabbing onto his nose and gnawing, making him scream. Ruffnut, seeing that the mouth wasn't large enough to actually harm her twin, sat back and enjoyed the show.

As always, without being able to touch the thing, the Terror's chattering was just outside of my understandingâ€"but, feeling the sun on my bruised back, and remembering this morning with a smirk, I had another idea.

The shield I was using was nicely polishedâ€"Gobber had beaten proper weapon care into me since I was about sixâ€"so it reflected the sunlight well, into a tiny dot. Sure enough, the Terror chased after it, just as mesmerized as Toothless had been.

As I shut the door behind the dragon, Tuffnut surprised me.

Out of the entire village, the only one who didn't seem that eager about me anymore was Astrid. Every time I glanced her way, it wasn't cool indifference anymoreâ€"it was a slow-burning, growing hatred that made me flinch just to think of it.

I didn't understand it. Before, well, we weren't friends, by far, but she seemed to just detest me least of anyone. At the very least, I would've expected her to be a little relieved, that her family no longer owed her little brother's life to the Useless.

I had no idea why, out of the 300-some people currently on Berk, Astrid was the last one to actually look at me, now that I was becoming a "real Viking". Some part of me was a little let down by it, I'd been crushing on her so longâ€"It stumped and bothered me, but to be frank, I don't have the courage to just walk up and ask her why that was.

So Tuffnut surprised meâ€"by getting right to the heart of the problem, in his usual blunt manner.

"Wow, he's better than you ever were!"

And with that, everything made sense.

(Especially since Astrid all but confirmed it by punching him right in the bitten nose.)

Astrid wasâ€"Astrid was jealous. Of me. Hiccup. I'd risen so far, that I was threatening her position as the top Viking trainee in the village, and she wasn't happy about it.

The thought almost made me nervous. I didn't know how to tell her that I didn't care about the stupid competition, that I didn't think about being the best dragon trainee anymore; I couldn't tell her that, not without insulting her further. Just like I'd learned to never tell a Hofferson that the whole business with Erik was nothing, for fear of them thinking I was pitying them, I couldn't tell Astrid thatâ€"

â€|that it wasn't for my own acceptance that I was doing so well. That I didn't work hard, or manage these things in the Ring for something as stupid as popularity.

She'd see it as a pity comfort, nothing more.

All I really wanted, anymore, was to learn more about dragons. The Ring gave me access to different breeds to try what I'd discovered with Toothless on. That was really it.

I didn't want to be the best, not anymore. Astrid could have that title.

I wished I knew a way to tell her that, without injuring her pride or culling my only way to experience other breeds of dragon.

Though, by the way she stormed right out of the Ring after punching Tuff in the face, her pride was injured enough already.

Sighing, I went over and held out a hand. Tuffnut looked up at me in surprise but took it, and I grunted with the weight as I struggled to help him up.

He snickered once he was vertical again. "'Ow, 'ur still pre-dy eek, arnd ya, Skirt?"

That made me blink. What did he just say? "â€|I'mâ€| sorry, you're gonna have to repeat that?"

"He said that you're still pretty weak," Ruffnut translated. I sent her a strange look, but she just shrugged. "After living with his nonsense for years, a punch in the nose makes him make more sense than usual."

"'Ey!"

I rolled my eyes, but frowned when I saw a bit of crimson start dribbling from Tuff's nostril. "Oh godsâ€|here. Pinch your nose high and tilt your head up."

Tuffnut did as he was told, until he felt the liquid touch his upper lip. "Doh!" he said, his eyes wide. "She dew bud!"

Ruffnut looked impressed. "Wow. It usually takes me at least three hits to bust that skull open!"

Fishlegs danced nervously off to the side as crimson dripped off of Tuffnut's chin. "He looks like he's losing a lot of blood," he worried.

"Ah, he'll be fine," Snotlout dismissed, flapping a hand, before looking at me. "How did you know to do that? I've never seen a Terror act like that before!"

I blushed deeply and laughed nervously. "Uh, huhâ€| just, guessed?"

My human cousin shook his head. "Urgh, I'll never understand how that head of yours works."

(I couldn't help but agree concerning his head, but since he was actually being less mean than usual, I didn't say anything out loud.)

"Oh, man!" Ruffnut's voice got our attention back on the twins. Her head was inches from her brother's face, eyes wide as blood continued to flow. "She must've hit you good!"

"Id der lods uh id?" Tuffnut asked.

"Yeah, buckets! I don't know how you're still conscious!" his twin gushed.

"M-aybe you should go see the Healer?" Fishlegs suggested.

Every last one of us winced. For myself, because of various blacksmithing accidents, I was basically on a first-name basis with the woman that Dad had assigned to stay on the island while the others went to keep the number of casualties at Helheim's Gate down. Helga was a sharp woman with leathery, sun-toughened skin, little sympathy, and less compassion unless you were dying, or a limb was off, you weren't really worthy of her precious time. A bruised and bitten nose wouldn't cover it.

"Yeah, like she'll do anything. Except yell at us. And kick us out."

"An' deet us over da 'ed," Tuffnut seemed to agree well, he was nodding, anyway. A light sparked in his eyes. "Souns like a goo' idea! Led's go!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. As much as I hated to cut down on my time with Toothless I had planned on putting the final touches on the pulley and stirrup system I'd spent the last two weeks on, then testing out what the different angles of the opened fin did in flight as well as my recently updated harness I couldn't just leave the twins when I had something that might help.

"I think I've got something that might stop the bleeding," I offered, earning their attention. "It's back at my house."

Ruff and Tuff shared a look. "A chance ta see indide da Chei's 'ouse? Awesome!" Tuffnut gushed.

"If it'll stop him from complaining louder than Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjástr's hooves, I'm game," Ruffnut agreed. "What about you guys?"

"Nah, I've been there a hundred times, and I need to head back. I skipped dagmal and there's a big plate waiting for me." Snotlout, as my cousin, had dropped by my house a few times for dinner. Not one of those events had ended well for me most resulted in me losing a few hairs to a near-brain-damagingly severe noogie.

Fishlegs declined too, saying he was going to read over the Dragon Manual once more. We left the Ring together, me watching the others talk and bicker as we climbed the big hill towards the Great Hall and my house.

When we reached the path to my place, we split up, and I led Ruffnut

and Tuffnut into the house. The door hadn't yet been replacedâ€"it was about number 287 on my list of things to build, to be honestâ€"but at least the rooms were well-aired when we stepped inside.

The twins looked around, taking in everything in sight. It wasn't muchâ€"most Viking homes were the same, with a big main room that had a cooking fire in the center and beds in a corner. The only thing that made our place special was theâ€"

"Whoa! You have a _second floor_?" Ruffnut asked, her eyes wide.

I blushed and nodded. "That's my room. Give me a sec, I've got some salve for you upstairs."

The only reason I felt comfortable enough leaving them alone was because I could still hear them from my loft, and even then, I hurried once a fight broke out downstairs.

Ruffnut had Tuffnut (who was _still_ _bleeding_) in a chokehold. I don't know why I was surprised.

"Are youâ€"would you put your brother _down_ for a second so he won't bleed to death?" I snapped. Surprised, Ruffnut dropped Tuffâ€"onto his face.

The male twin let out a screech of pain that made my ears hurtâ€"impressive, since I'd been around Toothless's near ballistic shrieks for a long while now and was used to _those_â€"and shot back to his feet. "Owowowowâ€"I'n hurd I an thedy much hurd!"

I rolled my eyes. "Sit down, Tuff, lemme put this on you."

He did as I said, but kept fidgeting as I dunked a few small bandages into a green mixture before smacking them across his nose. _Toothless_ had been easier to hold still, to be honest.

Ruffnut watched from the side, curious. "Where'd you learn to do that?" she asked.

I shrugged. "You know that whole learning on the job thing Gobber has? He taught me in the forge the same way. Since Helga's not alwaysâ€"er, welcoming, I learned how to take care of myself." I pulled another strip out and squeezed the extra potion off before settling it onto his nose, shaping it gently so that it might heal the right way. Tuff whined and kicked, but I dodged out of the way and kept going. "Grandmother taught me how to make this stuff."

"'Oo god a gran'ma?" Tuff asked, and for once, I could make it out.

"Gothi," I nodded, knowing that wasn't common knowledge, even if it wasn't exactly a _secret_. "She took care of me a lot, when I was little."

"Waitâ€"mute old Gothi? The old crone that lives waaay out on the sea stacks?" Ruffnut asked.

I frowned. "Yes, uhâ€" _that mute old crone_ raised me until I was three."

"I 'eard she kin tell 'oo when 'u're gon die, jus' by 'ookin' a' 'ur tong'!"

No matter what that actually meant, I focused on ignoring it. I knew the rumors about my grandmother crisscrossing Berk, and I knew how she was seen among the general population—but I also knew that she tended to like it that way, because it gave her peace and quiet that otherwise, most Vikings would not have let her have. So no matter how true or false, I had to let the rumors go.

(It was hard sometimes, to ignore some of the things being said, but you do hard things for your family, right?)

"There." The plaster and cast on Tuff's nose was done. "That should hold until you're healed. Take it off tomorrow, or the day after, and I don't think head butting will help it any."

"Awww. Dine." Tuffnut stood back up, poking at his nose lightly. "Danks, Skirt."

Why in Hel's name was he calling me Skirt? Shaking my head, I ignored it and turned to Ruffnut, holding out the bowl of leftover potion. "If he starts hurting bad, slather it in this stuff and go to Grandm—"Gothi. She'll know what to do."

Ruffnut took the bowl in both hands. "Oh, good. So I won't have to deal with him whining all night."

Despite her words, something in her eyes made me pause. There was real gratitude and concern there, for her brother, and it made me smile.

Ruff paused, then gave me a smile back. It was softer than anything I'd seen on her face before, and almost strange but—nice.

"Thanks, Hiccup," she said, and she sounded more sincere than I'd ever heard her.

Ruff grabbed her brother by the collar and started marching him out of the house.

"Anytime," I called in reply.

Standing at the threshold, I watched them leave, arguing all the way down the hill and to their house. Once they were behind their doors, far out of sight and earshot, I turned around.

Over the weeks, I started to learn more about Vikings as well as dragons—I'd already known how they never outright apologized, or faced feelings they might have. But now, I was learning how you to read carefully, between the lines, to pick out what they never knew how to say.

Ruff's smile just now, told me that sometimes, maybe just with younger Vikings, emotions were possible. Difficult to work out from behind the walls, but there.

I shook my head to get the thoughts out of it. I could try and make

sense of Vikings later. It was time to go meet Toothless.

* * *

><p>Halfway to the cove, the sound of a frustrated battle cry made me freeze. The voice was familiar, and I looked up.<p>

Astrid, holding Reginlief high, was staring at me, her chest heaving in exertion. She'd been throwing it into pinesâ€"which certainly explained the sap I'd had to clean off last time she brought it in for a sharpenâ€"and looked a little wild, to be honest.

(It was kindaâ€| hot.)

But she still wasn't happy with me, and she had an axe, and I was carrying Toothless's flying stuff while wearing my harnessâ€"it probably wasn't the best time to stick around for a chat.

Moving as fast as I dared, I got out of the way, and, hearing her following thanks to that noisy, clanking skirt of hers, ducked behind a boulder. Once I knew I was out of sight, I took off, losing her instantly.

Half a second later, I was in the cove, and Toothless looked up. **"S**omething wrong**?"** he asked, concerned. It wasn't often that I full-out ran into the cove.

"Not really, justâ€| keeping out of sight**,"** I hedged, before lifting up my burden with a smile. **"Y**ou ready for this, bud**?"**

* * *

><p>Everything had been going brilliantlyâ€"the pulley and stirrup system that had taken so long to perfect was working beautifully, and with just a twitch of my ankle, I could get the fin to spread or close smoothly. No more awkward jerking, and even Toothless had crooned in appreciationâ€| after maybe twenty minutes of complaining about the weight of the metal and leather I'd needed to set against his side for it to work.

We'd even gotten a head start on mapping out the different positions, starting with him just talking me through a basic flight, how he would open and close his fins during take off, gliding, a dive, and landing. I used a piece of paper to sketch out how each position would look like, and then tied Toothless to a stump on one of the windier cliffs by the sea to test it out.

(He hadn't appreciated the ******OÃ°in-dam#ed _leash_****** either.)

Like I said, brilliant. Until Loki decided to kick me in the face again.

The rope snapped underneath us and we went flyâ€"er, out of control, tumbling over one another into the trees. I yelped as my bruised back and still-not-entirely-healed arms were abused, but when I sat up again, I was thankful that we hadn't gotten thrown over the sea and drowned.

I was less thankful once I saw that the metal hook holding the latch and line connected to my belt was bent closed.

"Oh, great," I muttered, giving an experimental tug. It didn't budge.

***W**hat**?* **Toothless asked, standing. I yelped as he dragged me up with him, and the sound made him freeze.
H**iccup**?*

Grumbling under my breath at my typical luck, I stood and yanked harder on the line attaching me to his back. I got nowhere. I huffed and blew my hair out of my eyes. ***L**ooks like I'm stuck to you for now. The latch got bent**.****

Toothless tried to turn his head to see, but couldn't reach. He looked back at me. ***T**oo weak to straighten it yourself**?****

I stuck my tongue out at him, then looked around. ***W**ell, there's one thing I could try. Help me out here, bud**.****

Pulling on the line lightly, I led him over to a pine tree and picked up the sturdiest looking stick that would fit in the hole. Toothless gave me a strange look, but I ignored it. Every once in a while, I'd explain simple tools to him, but right now, actually using this one took precedence.

I threaded the stick through the stuck latch and planted my feet. ***A**lright, Toothless, hold still real quick**.* **Seeming to understand, he copied me and stuck his paws into the dirt.

Pulling with all my mightâ€”however much that wasâ€”resulted in a slightly more open latch and a broken stick.

Grunting in disgust, I tossed the pieces into the woods. ***S**o now what**?**** Toothless asked. ***I** could try and bite through the leather**.****

C**an you reach it**?* I asked, dubious. But if he could, it would workâ€”his teeth were sharper than my seaxe, which would definitely not be able to get through the treated leather I'd used for the line. Toothless tried, and nearly sent me sprawling as he bent his back in an effort to get to the line. ***N**oâ€”no! Toothless, that's not going to work**!****

Toothless stopped and straightened out, giving me a look. He didn't like being told he couldn't do something; that Night Fury pride again. ***L**ooks like you are stuck, then. Wow. The gods must really hate you**.****

Ignoring that, I sighed and carded my hand through my hair. "I'll need my tools to fix thisâ€”but I can't take your saddle off without removing the fin and everything!" I complained. That was a solid hour's workâ€”if I could even reach all the straps from where I was stuck to his side! "How in Hel's name am I supposed to get this thingâ€”?"

T**ake me into the village**.*

I think I would've been surprised if Snotlout had showed up drunk off

his head, dancing naked, and kissing everyone in sight.

(Again.)

"_What_?" I demanded once the shock (and the horror of the returned mental picture) wore off, eyes wide. "Areâ€"are you _kidding_ me?"

Toothless rolled his eyesâ€"I'm pretty sure that was a habit he picked up from me, because I don't think most dragons knew how to roll their eyes. **"Y**ou said you need your toolsâ€"which I assume are in the Squish Nest. You can't take the saddle off and you can't remove it without them, so you have to take me intoâ€" what is it, Berk**?"**

I gaped at him. **"W**haâ€"buâ€"_Toothless**!**_*** I screeched. **"H**ave you lost your _mind_**?"** He gave me a look and I pulled at my hair. **"I** can't take you into _Berk_! You're a dragon! A huge, one-ton _dragon_! And it's a village of dragon-_killing_ Vikings**!"**

Toothless didn't look impressed. **"A**nd that should concern me becauseâ€" **?"**

That stunned me into silence for a second. **"D**id you hit your head on landing**?"** I wondered. He had to be insane! **"****_**H**ow_ is that not clear enough? You are a _dragon!_ They _kill_ dragons!_ What about that tells you it's a good idea to take you there**?"**

Toothless smirked, a flash of white teeth against black scales. **"I**'m touched that you're worried about me, Cousin**,"** he said, and I scowled, **"b**ut if no Viking managed to catch me in all the years I've been around Berk, I'm not really concerned about one more visit**."**

I gaped at him. **"T**hat's entirely different**!"** I yelped. **"Y**ou could _fly_ thenâ€"we're not ready for speeds like that yet, not if we need a quick escape**!"**

The dragon huffed. **"F**ine**,"** he shrugged, his powerful shoulders shifting. **"T**hen you can sleep with me in the cove, and show up to training tomorrow afternoon with a Night Fury attached at the hip. Good luck explaining that one**."**

The very thought made me freeze, thrills of horror going down my spine. I sighed and scrubbed a hand down my face. **"I** really hate it when you make sense**."**

Toothless laughed in my face and crouched, letting me climb back on.

* * *

><p>We waited until dark, hoping the shadows would hide Toothless well enough in the village. I was probably going to get in trouble for not checking in with Gobber, that I was still alive and heading home to bed, but it wasn't like I could just pop in at this point.<p>

Hey Gobber, I'm still breathingâ€"oh this? This is Toothless, my Night Fury. Well, I shouldn't really call him that to his face, since he'd probably sit on me again, but don't worry, he won't really hurt me. He's my cousin. Anyway, I'll just be off to bed! See you in the mornin'!

Yeah, that would pan out well.

Even though we hadn't had tested out flight for real yet, we were in tune enough so that I could ride him into the village, his wings carrying us over ten or fifteen foot stretches before we hit the ground again. His instincts for hiding were better than anything I could guide him through, so I told him where the forge was in a low, barely audible growl, and let him do the rest.

With my luck, of course it was on the edge of one of the steppes, right on the farthest side of the village from the shadowy shelter of forest. There were a few terrifying close callsâ€"a couple where I had to scramble off Toothless's back and hide him behind me, waving to the cheerfully greeting Vikings that passed.

(Cheerful greetingsâ€"weird after so many years of nothing but _get back inside!_)

"So who was that**?"** he asked, curious, looking after Hornbust as he continued waddling away. I tugged on the line to get him to move in the other direction, eager for the torch the man was carrying to go back to its normal size, with distance from me.

"Hornbust**,"** I hissed in reply. **"N**ow c'mon, the forge is right there**!"**

Gmoot was still far from full, which was good for sneaking a _dragon _into _Berk, _but hopefully it would still be light enough for me to work without lighting a fireâ€"_that_ would raise suspicions, at this time of night, which would be very bad for someone sneaking a _dragon_into _Berk_!

(Whether Toothless had been using common sense or not, I was seriously questioning my sanity with this one.)

As I walked into the forge, Toothless followed and peered around curiously, even catching his head on a bucket before throwing it away with a _crash_!

The sound made me jump. "Toothless!" I shushed. "Keep it down! We can't risk you being seen!"

Stupid dragon would get himself killed at this rate! Toothless sent me a look but didn't put his nose into anything else, looking around with curious eyes. **"S**o this is where you built my fin**?"** he asked, sniffing the air. **"T**he fire-squish-nest**?"**

"Uhâ€| Yeah**?"** I replied, taking advantage of the near sub-vocal sounds my throat could make while speaking Dragonese. **"T**his is a smithy, I made everything else you're wearing here, tooâ€| and _that_ is what I'm looking for**!"**

My hammer was too large to fit into the hole, but the file we used to dull down blades for a kid's first practice should workâ€”strong and thin. I led Toothless further in, grabbing the tool and turning around to slip it into the closed latch.

A perfect fit! **"A**lright bud, hold tight. This**â€”"*** I grunted, pulling hard, **"â€”**should**â€”"***

"Hiccup?"

That was Astrid's voice! We both looked up and at each other, terror flowing through me and curiosity filling Toothless's gaze.

Curiosity? Are you _kidding_ me? This idiot really was going to get himself _killed_!

Thinking quick, I grabbed my apron, hissed a **"K**eep quiet and _down_**!"**, and scrambled through the doors of the stall that we usually did business over, slamming the doors behind me to keep Toothless hidden. I could feel the line stretching through the gap, but it would have to do.

Astrid was standing maybe two yards from the stall, looking at me strangely. **"H**e**â€”"*** I coughed, switching back to Norse as the look on her face went from _weird kid_ to _what kind of yak milk has _he_ been drinking?_ "Hey! Hi Astrid! Hey, Astrid, hiâ€”| Sorry, a-about my throatâ€”what's up, Astrid?"

She frowned, narrowing her eyes at me. "I don't normally care _what_ people do, but you're acting weird," she said, pointing to me and glancing over my chest. I looked down at myselfâ€”you could kind of make out the lines of my flight suit through the apron, and the line and latch not hooked to Toothless was hanging free.

On top of that, Toothless chose that moment to tug on me for some reason. I was pulled back towards the stall in a sudden jerk, and the motion made Astrid jump in surprise.

"Well, weird_er_," she amended, and I would've winced had I not been terrified that the best _dragon-killing_ trainee on the island was about nine feet away from my _draconic_ _cousin_!

Toothless tugged on me again, and this time, I felt my feet leave the ground. I glanced down as another tug pulled me higher, and looked back up to see the look of complete shock on Astrid's face, before a third and final _yank_ pulled me through the stall doors.

Not wasting a secondâ€”no _way_ was she going to leave that beâ€”I jumped back into the forge and onto the saddle. **"L**et's _go**!**_***"*** I hissed, urgent, and kned Toothless in the side to move him towards the back exit.

We were leaping back through the villageâ€”the file safely in handâ€”when I glanced back. Astrid was looking through the, now gloriously empty, forge. I swallowed.

"Oh man, that was way too close**,"*** I muttered as Toothless reached the woods.

* * *

><p>He didn't stop until we reached the cove, and I let the fin spread wide to let him glide from the edge of the wall to the ground.<p>

The very _second_ we were on safe ground, terror turned to anger and I blew.

"What in the name of Loki's eight-legged lovechild were you _THINKING_**?"** I roared. **"D**o you have any _idea_ how close you came to getting _found_ back there! Astrid would've _killed_ you! She would have taken Reginliel, and thrown it into yourâ€"are you even _listening_ to me**?"**

Heâ€"he really wasn't. Toothless was shaking his head, his pupils more narrow than I'd seen them in a while. When he looked back up at me, the confusion andâ€"and was that _fear_? in his eyes made my anger freeze.

"Toothless?" I asked, concern growing. "Are you alright, bud?"

He growled lowly, shook his head one more time. **"I**â€"I think so**,"** he answered, looking almost dazed.

"You look a little out of it**."** I stepped forward and crouched, looking him in the eyes. His pupils were acting strangeâ€"widening and narrowing oddly, with no emotion or change in light to explain it. The sight was oddly familiar. **"W**hat happened**?"**

"I don't**â€"|"** Some sort of clarity came into his eyes and his ears flattened back as they grew hugeâ€"an expression I'd never seen before, but could only describe as _terror_.

The idea of something scaring my proud, confident Night Fury made my stomach queasy. _What_ could be so bad it made _Toothless_ nervous?

"Oh gods**."** I hadn't heard him whimper before, and the sound grated against me as all kinds of wrong. **"O**h _gods_**â€"|"**

"Toothless! Toothless, t-talk to me, bud, what's wrong**?"** I really _didn't_ want to know what could get him into a state like this, butâ€"well, I couldn't just leave him terrified! **"W**hat's wrong? Didâ€"did something in the village scare you**?"**

"Noâ€"no, not in the village. Oh gods, she'sâ€"she was there, I couldâ€"I couldn't**â€"|"** He shook his head hard, panicking and muttering under his breath.

I had to calm him down. Remembering how his touch had always soothed me, I bent and put both of my hands on his head, one on either jaw, and angled his face to look at me straight on.

"Hey. Toothless. Calm down, Cousin**,"** I said softly, a quiet croon that shook my entire chest. He latched onto my gaze, almost desperate, and slowly, he seemed to relax a little. **"T**hat's it.

You're okay. It's just me and you here, bud, just like always, right? Just you, and me, and the cove. No one's going to hurt youâ€”no one _can_ hurt you, remember? You're a big, tough Night Fury, and we're safe in here**."**

"Safe,**"*** he repeated, his voice trembling a little. I nodded, smiling gently. **"W**e're safe. Here. We're okay. She didn'tâ€”she can't reach me here. Okay**."**

"Exactly.**"*** I moved my hand to scratch at his ear, knowing he liked it. Sure enough, tense muscles eased under my fingers and I smiled. **"Y**ou okay now, buddy**?"**

Toothless nodded and creaked an eye open. When he pulled away again, I let him go, and wondered if a dragon could blush, because this one certainly seemed embarrassed. **"E**râ€”| thank you, Cousin**."**

I smiled. **"A**nytime**,"** I replied, before looking at him. **"Y**ouâ€”| wanna tell me what that was about**?"**

Toothless shook his head, snorting air. **"N**ot particularly**."**

I had a feeling it was more than an embarrassed reluctance keeping him silent, so I didn't press. **"A**lright, then. Let's just get each other off us then, huh**?"**

Pulling the file from my belt, I slipped it into the hole and started pulling again, widening the broken hook with every yank. Toothless didn't say anything while I worked, and I left him to his thoughts.

"Alâ€”mostâ€”| gotcha!"

I slipped my second line out of the hook with a triumphant sound, smiling at my success. A glance back at the hook damped my joy somewhatâ€”that would need replacingâ€”but maybe I wouldn't have to take the entire set up back to the forge to get it back in. I could just make another hook, grab some leather-working supplies, and fix it right here in the coâ€”

"You've mentioned, a few times, that your flock is having food troubles**?"**

I blinked in surprise and looked over to Toothless. He wasn't looking at meâ€”head angled awayâ€”but it wasn't like anyone else could have spoken.

"Er, yeah**,"** I answered. **"W**inter's on the way, and the village is like, 400 people now. With so few herds and most of the lakes and ponds fished out, plus the raidsâ€”| but we'll manage, we always do**."**

No Viking would ever admit that we were in serious troubleâ€”which we were on the verge of being. Rather, we'd just tough it out. It's what we were born to do, whether it be famine on land or a storm at seaâ€”we just plant our feet and wait it out. More than our viciousness, more than our love for war, the thing that defines us is that we are all characteristically _stubborn_.

***"W**e didn't know it was getting so bad for the squishes**,"**
Toothless said, and the words made me pause. Toothless _had_ been
part of the raids, just a few months agoâ€"a terrifying, inexplicable
part of them, too. I'd almost forgotten. It didn't really seem like
the same dragon. ***"I** mean, we might've noticed, and stopped,
maybe, had she**â€"***

I frowned. ***"S**he who**?"** I wondered.

Toothless stiffenedâ€"I could see muscles bunching up underneath his
scales. He finally turned to face me, and the fear in his eyes made
me freeze.

***"I** can't tell you**,"** he said, quiet and scared. ***"N**otâ€"not
yet. She justâ€" we got too close. Your village, is too close. I
almostâ€" and even now, her compulsion**â€"***

***"C**ompulsion**?"** The word was strange, and I didn't really
understand. ***"T**oothless, what do youâ€"***?

He froze up. ***"I shouldn't've said that,**" he said, like he'd
just realized it. ***"I** shouldn'tâ€"I can't say**â€"***

Though my curiosity was killing me, the sight of my cousin so scared
beat down any other feeling I could've had. I put my hand back on his
head and felt him move into the touch, eager for the comfort it
provided.

Toothless was apparently _very_ eager for it, because he didn't stop
at a head-touch. He pushed forward, his nose in my chest, and, still
sensing how freaked out he was, I wrapped my arms around his neck in
a hug.

He shifted, limbs and wings moving. Holding him close, I didn't
really see it, but I could feel and somehow tell when his paws
wrapped around my torso and legs, and his wings enfolded us both into
one big black cocoon.

It was the darkest thing I'd ever experiencedâ€"and the warmth
radiating from the smooth scales, the steady, heavy heartbeat, and
slowing, deep breaths made it the most comforting spot I'd ever been
in.

"It's okay," I muttered, feeling the words rumble into his chest even
though they were in Norse. "You don't have to say anything."

It was quiet and still for a moment, and the sheer calm in those few
seconds just about lulled me to sleep. Maybe I imagined the last
sentence I heard, before my eyes closed and I fell deep into NÃ³tt's
realm of dreams, but maybe I didn't.

***"G**ods know I haven't done anything in my life to deserve you,
Cousin, but thank our sire that you came anyway**."**

* * *

><p>So... how was it?

***Two comments: Tanngrisnir and TanngnjǶstr are the names of the
goats (yup-_goats_) that pull Thor's chariot. Their hooves are

responsible for the sound of thunder during storms.**

The village is around 400 people. This is pretty darn big for a Viking tribe, according to dyannehs, just so you know. That fact makes feeding everyone a big problem for Stoick, even just considering realistic issues, without dragons.

See you tomorrow!

PEACE,

~Tibki

13. Chapter 13

Hey y'all!

Not much to say here. I'm going back to the States Saturday morning (it's Thursday morning now, where I am... \$hit, I gotta pack) and it's something like 16 or 17 hours total of traveling, so please don't be surprised if a chapter or two are late, even after Saturday-because then I gotta take a test for summer course credit, contact the honors college, meet my new roommate, move in, talk with the insurance companies, buy my books, prepare for the semester, and deal with jet lag. In four days. Fun, huh?

**But I promise I'll put everything up like I planned. Have no worries; this will not become _Earth Day_.

>

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER THIRTEEN_

The next morning dawned more beautifully than I'd ever seen.

The air was clear and fresh, and even though it was still red with dawn, you could tell the sky would be a shade of deep blue that no season except late summer could manage. Clouds already rose like sea stacks in the air, towering and white, misshapen and soft. It was a very rare, wonderful day on Berk, and it was the kind of day Vikings liked to take advantage of.

Most people would probably spend it leisurely, brawling together in fields, moving the Great Hall's tables outdoors to eat, taking a quick sail around the island, because the waters wouldn't be this calm or nice to navigate again until late spring. Normally, I'd spend a day like this out in a clearing, deep in the woods, that opened onto the shore of a small harbor. I'd run at full speed, dig my feet into moist soil and sand, sometimes even putting my feet into the water, and pick bilberries to eat.

Today, I had other plans.

Just before dawn, I woke up in Toothless's hold, and woke him up too when I tried to gently move out of it. We both noticed the sheer

perfection of the day to come and the sky over our heads at the same time, and shared a knowing, immediate look.

"We're not going to have a better day for this," I said, and Toothless leapt to his feet, wings flapping wide in pure excitement.

Y**es, _finally_ he roared. ***L**et's go***

I laughed and stood as well. ***H**ey, hold up, bud, don't you want breakfast first***?*** I asked.

That made him pause. I grinned brightly as he seemed to consider each option to the fullest extent, thinking them through and comparing, weighing carefully. It really was something, to see the dragon thinking so hard about _breakfast_.

A**lright**, he begrudged. ***B**ut be quick about it***!

I rolled my eyes and bowed at the waist. ***W**hatever you say, my liege**,*** I snarked before turning on my heel to leave.

A**nd don't you forget it!** he called from behind me.

Unable to resist, I looked over my shoulder. "And just for that, I'll go and visit the other dragons before dropping back by! Sound alright?"

N**o it does not sound alright you little _flame**!

Toothless roared in complaint and fired a shotâ€"it never came within thirty feet of me, but it still hit the rock wall twice the size it had beenâ€"and I laughed while speeding out of there.

* * *

><p>I did go get Slither and Tricky's yak milk and visited the Nadder before I went for Toothless's fish. Having spent the night in the cove, I never got to visit them yesterday, and while I was still doubtful that the Nadder cared much, I knew Slither and Tricky would worry.

So, while the village was still sleepy enough for me to run at full speed, I milked two buckets out of one of Mulch's yaks and grabbed my belt-bag with the pumice inside. The people were barely stirring, so as long as I was quiet, nothing would be seen out of the ordinary.

When I reached the Ring, SÃ³l was peeking her head over the horizon, casting red light and dark shadows over everything. The granite floor had picked up dew, turned into fog with the lightening sky and now disappearing with the rising sun.

With it lighter, I couldn't risk letting them out into the open. Putting down one bucket, I pulled the lever enough to open the doors a little, and slipped into the Zippleback cage.

Slither and Tricky looked up at the light and erupted into happy hisses and screeches when I smiled at them.

"Sorry I couldn't drop by last night," I whispered, still being careful. I huffed and dropped the first bucket before grabbing the second from outside. "There was a bit of an accident with Toothless and I fell asleep in the cove."

Slither gurgled as Tricky picked up his first bucket. I stepped around the edges of the crowded hole in the wall and laid a hand on their side.

****I**s NÃ³tt's Prince alright**?*__**__ Slither asked, probably repeating himself from what I hadn't been able to hear earlier.

I'd discovered, the week before last, that, to my exasperation, Toothless hadn't just been his normal half-arrogant self when he claimed to be the best of the dragons. '_NÃ³tt's Prince_' wasn't just the dragon-name for his species, like Spine-Shooter or Fire-Skin. Apparently, having been created by the gods themselves meant you were, practically literally, considered dragon royalty.

(I'd made a promise to myself, the very second I'd found that out, to _never_ let him lord that over on me. He was bad enough already. No matter how much sarcasm it took, I would keep that ego _down_.)

****Y**eah, he's fine. Neither of us were really hurt, justâ€¦ stuck for a little while**.*__**_**_* Remembering what had happened afterward, I paused, and then asked carefully, ****_**_**_**H**ey, Slither? Mind if I ask you something**?*__**_**_****

****O**f course, Hiccup**.**_*_

****T**oothlessâ€¦ well, I don't know _what_ happened, to be honest**.*__**_**_* I sat down, still keeping contact, and looked to the dark wall of the cage. ****_**_**_**I**t was likeâ€¦ I had to bring him into Berk last night, and he started actingâ€¦ I dunno, _weird_, after we'd been there for a minute. And, and when we got back to the cove, he wasn't acting like himself, he was dazed and, and _scared_! I didn't know he _could_ get scared! He started talking about something call a compulsion and a 'she' and**â€¦**_**_**_****

Tricky next to us choked on his second bucket, and nearly spat out the yak milk. Slither reeled away from me, his eyes wide and terrifiedâ€¦much like Toothless's had been.

Dread curled in my stomach. So it wasn't just Toothless who was afraid of thisâ€¦| _she_.

****S**he's still _alive**_?_**_**__ Tricky yowled, panic in his voice.

***_**_**O**h godsâ€¦"oh gods she's still out thereâ€¦"oh gods**â€¦**_**_**_

"Hey, hey, calm down!" I yelped, letting go of their side to reach out with both hands. "It's alright! There's no one here, it's

okay!"

I held out my handsâ€”for once, I was thankful that the ceiling was so low, because it let them see and stretch into my palms more easily. I knew, from testing it out in the Ring, that while only Toothless could make me relax, my hands could calm any dragon down with just a touch.

""__**_**T**hat's it**,**__****_****I hissed softly, scratching lightly. ****_****_**S**orry to bring it up, butâ€”you know who that 'she' is**?**__****_****

Slither and Tricky shared a look. _**"**_**W**e do**â€”|**__******_ they said in unison. _**"**_**A**ll the dragons on the Archipelago know**,**__******_ Slither added.

""__**_**B**ut even those that have been out of her reach for a while, like us**,**__******_ Tricky continued, _**"**_**w**e don't like to speak of her**. **__******_

I frowned. ****_****_**W**hy not**?**__****_****

""__**_**D**o squishes say bad things about dead enemies**?**__**/"****_ Slither asked.

That was an odd tangent, but I shook my head. ****_****_**N**o, we don't really dare. We're afraid their spirits will rise and**â€”****_****_**** I paused. ****_****_**A**re you afraid she'll come to Berk, if you mention her**?**__****_****

""__**_**I**t's not impossible**,**__******_ Tricky put in. _**"**_**_**â€”|**_**She_'s__ connected to a lot of dragons on the islands. Raising the dead isn't anything simple, even for most godsâ€”her picking up what's being said between us, though**â€”|**__******_

""__**_**S**oâ€”so she's got some kind of power over you**?**__****_**** Neither Slither nor Tricky replied, but I could see the fear that confirmed it in their eyes. ****_****_**A**lrightâ€”thank you, for being brave enough to tell me that. I won't ask you anymore, I promise**. **__****_****

""__T**hank you_, Kind Squish**,**__******_ they said together, sincere and relieved.

Stepping away, I waved a goodbye to them, but before I could leave, Slither moved his head forward and dropped it onto my shoulder.

""__**_**H**iccup, are you going to see the Spine-Shooter**?**__******_ I nodded, confused. _**"**_**S**he wasn't given dinner last nightâ€”she'll be grumpy**. **__******_

That was definitely good, if depressing, to know. ****_****_**W**hat do Nadders eat**?**__****_****I asked. I knew that if I asked anyone in the village, I'd probably get an answer like _anything in front of themâ€”human limbs included, boy!_, but

with Toothless's love for fish and fish alone, and these guys's preference for yak milk, I figured it might be better to ask a dragon.

*****_**T**hose odd birds squishes keep in small houses**.**_*****_

Chicken, then. No way would I be able to grab an entire bird, butâ€¦ it might be cold, but the dinner I'd never gotten around to cooking last night, back at the house, was a chicken leg.

***T**hanks for the warning. See you tonight, alright**?*_*_***_*** I gave him a final scratch, and slipped out the door.

The path from the Ring to my house was short and safely secluded, so it took me a fraction of a second to get the leg and get back.

When I peeked through the cage for the Nadder, she would've blown my head off had it not been fireproof.

Suddenly doubly grateful for Slither's warning, I tossed the legâ€”now a little cooked after allâ€”in before I even looked back inside.

There was an interested gobble, and then the sound of the Nadder eating, bones crunching. Figuring it safe, I ducked my head back in.

One large eye watched me as I entered, and cautiously let me lay a hand on her beak-like jaw. **"(D**o you have any more**?)*** she asked, and behind the steady question, I could hear the desperation of hunger.

"(I**'m sorry I don't**,) I admitted sincerely. ***"(I**f I could risk stealing a whole bird unnoticed, I would, but if I triedâ€¦ well, I don't think you'd ever see me again, honestly**.)*** Maybe that was an over-exaggeration, but in no way would any of the Vikings be happy if they caught me stealing foodâ€”but if they found out it was for a _dragon_?

Well. Then, it _wouldn't_ be an over-exaggeration.

"(I** do have pumice to polish your scales, though**,)" I offered, holding up the bag as a peace offering.

She squawked a gruff assent and I dodged around her side to start at the duller spot. After a few minutes, she went back to sleep, and I didn't blame herâ€”I knew the best way to ignore hunger was to take your mind off it, and sleep was the easiest way to accomplish that.

Sometimes I wondered just how unobservant Vikings were. Slither and Tricky, when they were brought back out into the Ring, were taking more and more joy in making as much gas as possibleâ€”never less than twice what they had when I first saw them. The last time I'd met them in that cloud of smoke (paired with Snotlout (unfortunately enough, though he _had_ been easing up on theâ€¦ torment) who'd already run for his life), Tricky had actually _winked_ at me. The Nadder, for her part, was brighter and bluer by several shades, and running around, faster and more eager than she'd ever been.

I had heard Gobber muttering, in the forge, that the dragons were giving us a better workout in training than he'd ever gotten, but that didn't really count. Gobber, despite his blunt and gruff attitude and lack of anything resembling tact, was actually pretty sharp, and those beady eyes saw more than he let on.

Once the Nadder's scales were done, I left her cage and the Ring, walking quickly until I was back on the road to my house. It would be less suspicious, for anyone to see me there than at the Ring at this time of the morning.

Trading greetings with a few of the Vikings up and about, I went down to the storehouse in the very center of the village.

Luckily for me, there were two entrances—the main one, and a tiny little hole only a hiccup could really fit into, in the back. It was dark and cold inside, but I could hear Bucket and Mulch talking as they loaded a few sparse net-fulls of fish into the room. Wincing at the guilt eating at me, and the way my stomach growled being so near to preserved food, I snatched a basket and snuck back out the way I came.

Hefting the basket onto my back, I turned towards the woods and made my escape, trying to look as unsuspicious as I could.

* * *

><p>Toothless, predictably, swallowed as much of the fish as quickly as he could and then sat up, looking at me balefully. The sight made me chuckle, but I was eager to get up there too. I wasn't even thinking about my squirming and empty stomach; talking or moving loudly when it growled was second nature now, to hide it.<p>

But who cared—we were going flying today!

I swung my foot over his side and hooked both of the latches into place. Toothless shuffled underneath me, restless and eager. For one last ground-check, I shifted my ankle and watched the tailfin extend out into a take-off position.

"Ready, bud?" I asked, patting him on the head.

I** thought you'd never ask**!

With a roar of joy, he snapped his wings out to their full length on either side of me. Grinning already, I crouched low on his back and held on tight as he kicked off the ground with his powerful legs, the jolt leaving my stomach far below.

And then we were in the air, and climbing fast—I shifted my foot, thinking for a moment before remembering the size he'd said was best for gaining altitude.

Berk was laid out underneath us, sharp juts of green and grey mountains piercing the clouds that rose around us like impossibly immense towers. Going to the village had let the sun come all the way up, and the sky was as beautifully blue as I'd expected it to be—endless and deep, and stretching in a wide dome from horizon to horizon, pale by the sea and azure above. It was broken only by the

bright warmth of Sã³l and the fluffy white constructs of Frigg.

The air was moving fast up here, but when Toothless leveled out into a nice glide, it seemed to calm. Used to similar speeds, my eyes didn't water, and the wind carded through my hair like intangible hands.

We were so amazingly high, but I didn't feel any fear at allâ€”Toothless was a solid presence underneath me, and I could almost sense his joy and peace with the world.

A**lright**! I called over the passing air. ***W**e're gonna take this nice and slow, bud**!***

Toothless grumbled. ***W**here's the fun in that**?*** he muttered.

I patted his head. ***T**he fun is in not dying**!*** I looked down at the little sheet of parchment I'd tacked onto the saddle in front of me, with the different fin positions drawn on it. ***N**ow let's see, position fourâ€”no, three**.*

A shift of the foot and a squeak of the joints, and I smiled. Toothless glanced back to check which way it had opened and huffedâ€”we'd had a few conversations about how much freedom he'd really have while flying, if I was the one deciding his tail movements. I'd promised him that I would never force him into anything he didn't want to do, but I think it was more the principle of the thing to him.

Still, he was in the air again, so he didn't say anything as we banked smoothly.

I pulled on the saddle and my latches, to make sure they were tight, and turned around to look at the fin. It wasn't as moving as effortlessly in the wind, nor was it as coordinated as Toothless's own, but it wasn't failing us and that was more than enough for me.

H**ow's it holding up**? Toothless asked.

S**o far, so good**! I turned back around and looked down with a grin. Toothless glanced up. ***A**lright, it's go timeâ€”it's go time, bud, let's go**!***

He roared in agreement and nosed downward towards the ocean. The sight of the near-bottomless water made me swallow, but I clenched my jaw and just looked ahead. Even if I dropped, I knew Toothless would save me.

It was a smooth flight over to the sea stacks, through empty, salty air. Almost in synch, we sailed through the offshore winds right towards themâ€”they'd be a perfect first test. "That's it, c'mon buddy!" I said as we got closer to the waves and the low fog of the morning.

Toothless angled, dipping his wing into the water and sending a small wave up. I laughed as it splashed into my face, cool and wet, and Toothless chuckled underneath me.

We went right underneath one of the arches, watching as a flock of seagulls took off from their perches. The perfect aim and steady handling made me grin. "It worked!"

W**ait,Hicccâ€"OW**!

Too busy enjoying our first success for me to notice, we went right into another sea stack. I winced, seeing the claw marks he left on the rock. "Sorry," I yelled, pulling him away from the thingâ€|

â€| and right into another one.

*****_**O**W!_*****

"That's my fault, sorry!" Toothless growled and slapped an ear to the side, hitting me in the face again. "Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. Position threeâ€"no, four."

I** thought you _built_ this contraption, you little flame**,
Toothless grumbled, angling his head to see which way he should turn his fin. ***S**houldn't you know how it works, or do all squishes just throw things together and pray**?***

W**ould you just shut up and climb**? I snapped back.

*****_**F**inally,_ we do something _interesting**!**_*****

Any reply I had to _that_ was torn out of my mouth as he tilted up, wings moving fast and hard.

The ground was shrinking underneath us and the wind was roaring around us, and the fin was _working!_ Toothless roared in elation and I screamed out with him, laughing into the ripping air.

We were past the peaks of Berk's mountains, so high that even the clouds were falling around us. Above, the sky was endless and so very blue, a world open only to us, immense and ready to explore.

There was _nothing_ between us and the earth. Empty, unbroken air surrounded my spine and I leaned back, feeling the lines stretch but hold firm, completely unafraid. My heart raced with adrenaline, and pride, and amazement, because it was my hands that put us up here, my hands and his wings. Something as simple as two minds, ten fingers, and fifty feet of skin, had led to something as great as _this._

Flying was everything I'd thought it would be, and _more._ Not just taking one step into the air and running off, but feeling my center turn and shift as Toothless did, feel the pull of Midgard's surface change from my feet to my stomach to my backâ€"it tossed my insides like a salad and threw my heart into my throat. I wasn't scared, far from itâ€"the smooth shifts and the speed and the awe were too familiar, too perfect. Forget scared. I was _alive._ I was _home._

Toothless was home, finally. We both were.

"Oh, this is _amazing!_"

***I** know**!"**

"The wind in myâ€"cheat sheet!"_

Ecstatic joy morphed into pure panic as the piece of parchment was torn off and went flying through the air. I scrambled to grab it, reaching as far as I could behind me. ****_**S**top**!**_*** **I yelled, just as it slipped back into my fingers.

Sensing my alarm, Toothless did just that.

Except, since I was lighter, I didn't stop with him, flying higher still with our momentumâ€"and panic turned into sheer, unadulterated _terror_ as both my latches slipped free of the hooks.

Our gazes met for barely a fraction of a second.

And then we plummeted.

I _screamed_, because the tiny island underneath no longer looked beautifulâ€"it looked like a painful and final destination and oh gods, we were _falling!_

"Ohgodsohgodsohgodsoh_GODS_â€"!"

Wind tore past my ears. The horizon and sky traded places again and again, blue and green blurring as I flipped head over heels, around my side, in every direction, completely out of control and heading straight _down._

***N**o! Not _again_**!"** I heard Toothless screech. He was a black strip in the blur of the world, passing in and out of my vision.

I think I passed him at some pointâ€"there was a wing, and then there wasn't, and the eddy of air left behind it left me spinning.

***C**ousin**!"** Toothless roared, just as terrified as I was.

****_**T**oothless**!**_**** I shrieked, spreading my arms out in an effort to reach him. It managed to steady me, the horizon and sky staying where they should be, but now I was set to hit the ground stomach-first.

_Ohgodsohgodsohgodsoh_â€"_"

A blur of brownâ€"the saddle! I had to be on the saddle, we'd be able to get out of thisâ€"maybeâ€"well, half a chance was better than _certain death_! ***Y**ou gottaâ€"Toothless, tr-try and kinda, _angle_ yourselfâ€"***!"**

He tried, he really didâ€"and succeeded in spinning sideways, end over end, his tail whipping past me a few times untilâ€"

WHACK

****_**A**H_!******

The false end of his tail slammed into my face with all the force of a catapult's stoneâ€"pain erupted like fire across my eye and cheek.

I could feel skin split against the metal ribs of the fin and blood start flowing, but more immediately, I was sent flying in another direction.

Pushing the pain to the side, I grabbed the sheet with my teeth and reached for Toothless again. He was still spinning, but by some miracle I managed to get past that tail of his.

My hands were _inches_ away from the saddleâ€”

*****_**G**OT IT**!**_*****

I yanked myself into place, foot into pedal and one latch into a hookâ€”that was all the time I had, the ground was rushing up to meet us faster than anything I'd ever felt before in my _life_.

***P**ULL UP**!"** Toothless roared, and I grabbed the handholds on the saddle to yank upwards.

We straightened and his wings flared to either side, ballooning wide with caught air. There was no way we were any more than twenty feet over the treetops. I heard him screech in pain as his wings pulled and winced, narrowing my eyes to try and see over the flapping sheet in my mouth.

I reached up to slap the thing downâ€”wait, was that blood?â€”out of my face and then felt my stomach drop.

There were sea stacks in front of usâ€”not the easy-to-see, widespread ones from before, which we'd _still_ crashed into, but _hundreds_ of them, close together and half-hidden by fog and ocean spray.

There was no way in _Yggdrasil_ we were ready for that!

***W**e're gonna _die_**!"** Toothless shrieked, seeing the same thing I was.

My chest throbbed, the pounding heartbeat leaving my limbs shaking. Not a single thought of my own fate came to mindâ€”who'd miss the hiccup son of the Chief? But Toothlessâ€”this couldn't be it for himâ€”this couldn't be it, we couldn't be about to _die_, not so soon, not on his first time truly _flying_ again after what I didâ€”

The horrible certainty filled me, at that moment, that this was my fault. I'd torn him from the sky, made him unable to fly, and now on his first flight backâ€”

Toothless was going to die because of me.

_My brother is going to _die_, and it's all my fault._

* * *

><p>The thing behind my heartâ€”the thing I never had a name for, that reacted to the oddest things and offered surety whenever my life seemed too hard to handleâ€”it opened.

Heat _poured_ out of it, brighter and hotter than a Nadder's fire and

more explosive than Toothless's own blasts. It popped under my skin and flared, moving and glowing like smelted iron, through my hands and deep beneath the scales underneath my palms.

I could feel it flow through him tooâ€”how it filled every claw, every muscle of his body, every inch of the huge thin skein that covered his enormous wings, filling him up with burning heat, not painful but substantial.

It hit something in his core and then suddenly, I wasn't a human on a dragonâ€”and he wasn't a dragon underneath a human. We wereâ€”bothâ€”pain shared on the face, in joint of the wing; eyesight sharp as a hawk's and as mobile as a human's; the heat of a fire in the chest and the touch of wind on unscaled skinâ€”

The fire connecting us didn't come near to being affected, but still, the furious determination that filled us both was like ice.

"_**NO!***_**"

To this day, I can't tell you which one or if both of us roared it out, that first time it happened, but the handicap sheet in my mouth went flying away, never to be seen again.

Hands and knees crouched low, chest to back, streamlining usâ€”left foot shifted automatically to match the right fin, knowledge of position clashing and dancing with instinct for flight and sending commands in both directions.

The sea stacks came at us, and we roared at the challenge.

Downâ€”leftâ€”spin rightâ€”narrow passage, wings tight to the body and d r o pâ€”up again, wide while we canâ€”upside down, fin all the way outâ€”bend knees to lift from saddle, throw weight to leftâ€”

â€”and then we were out.

The air ahead was clear and empty, no spray, fog, or stack. It was over. We got past it. We'd flown past itâ€”

Elation at true flight danced with the electric thrill of success, warm and happy and fast, spinning like air in a sea storm.

The Night Fury flies again!_

"YES**!"**

Something hot gathered in the mouth, and then shot outwardsâ€”and a very human fear of fire at the sight of the fireball in front of us.

Maybe it was the reminder of my own mortalityâ€”that even though the drop hadn't killed us, my arms and legs could still get burnt to a crispâ€”that dragged me back and away. The warmth holding us together receded and the thing behind my heart closed, like some kind of strongbox.

"Oh come _on_," I whined, ducking so that my arms were pinned between my chest and the saddle.

The heat was soft on my face and back, and thank _Thor_ my pants didn't catch fire. We were past it in a few seconds.

Moments later, we were gliding peacefully once more on a gust of ocean wind.

When I uncurled again, I had to lift my hand in front of my face, count the fingers to make sure they were still _digits_, and not claws. ****What _was_ that?**** I muttered, flexing it into a fist.

The sound of a creak and a squeak made me looked back and downâ€"I almost didn't even realize it, but I'd moved my foot to match Toothless' other fin. Byâ€"by instinct? How?

I** think I might have an idea, Cousin**, Toothless rumbled from underneath, surprising me. ***B**ut _first_**â€"****

Before I realized what was happening, his wings snapped close to his bodyâ€"and my foot clicked into positionâ€"for a sharp dive. I didn't scream, just held on and squeezed tight with my thighs as he shot a blast of purple fire into the water.

We swung over the steam and banked back around, and I blinked at the amount of dead fish now floating in the water. "What theâ€"|?"

Toothless glanced up with a strained but, well, toothless, smile. ***D**agmal is served**."***

* * *

><p>Describing flight was tricky-one of my biggest dreams, of course-but describing flight without using pronouns, when they got smooshed into one being, was trickier. I hope it read okay, because that was about the best I could manage.

Until tomorrow, my lovelies!

Hope you liked it!

***PEACE,**

~Tibki

14. Chapter 14

***Hey y'all,**

Can't talk for long, last day on site and I need a few things done beforehand. But I wasn't gonna leave you hanging so here ya go! Hope you like it!

***DISCLAIMED.**

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FOURTEEN_

It wasn't easy getting all that fish onto the nearest islandâ€"it involved a lot of quick dives and Toothless grabbing as much as he could in one mouthful while I tried my best to snatch one, maybe twoâ€"but we managed a large pile, and landed on a little strip of unfertile rock poking out of the sea in geometric shapes.*

He landed smoothly, adding a small jump after the first touch to ground to slow down. I unhooked my latches and slid off, turning to face him immediately.

***W**haâ€"what _was_ that? Up there**?"** I repeated myself, confused andâ€"well, actually, not disturbed at all. Maybe I should've been, but it didn'tâ€"| _feel_ wrong. Not being disturbed, though, didn't mean I wasn't a little freaked out. That had beenâ€"I didn't even know _what_ that was!

***H**ow did thatâ€"how did _we_â€"|**?"**

***I** told you I had an idea**,"** Toothless interrupted, sounding far too calm in my opinion, but there was still something underneath his tone that was strained. ***A**nd I'll tell youâ€"but only _after_ you get something into that ridiculously thin shred of flesh you call a stomach, you stupid Squish**."**

I gaped at him. ***W**hâ€"| what are you, _mother-henning_ me now**?"**

The look he gave me was decidedly unimpressed. ***H**iccup**,"** he said seriously, and my mouth closed. ***I** _felt_ your hunger up there. When was the last time you had something to eat**?"**

The question made me freeze. I was making a sizable dent in Berk's food storage by feeding Toothless an entire basket of fish every morning, and though I fished as often as possible to make up for it, there was only so much a hiccup like me could catch in one day. So, trying to keep that dent small, I sometimesâ€"| let someone else have the food that would've otherwise had my name on it.

I never let Toothless know, though I think he'd had some idea of it, back when he'd killed that crow for me. After that, I absolutely gave him _no_ indication that it was still happening, because I had a feeling I _knew_ what he'd have to say about it.

I still knew what he'd have to say about it, so I tried to dodge around the questionâ€"it wasn't that hard, seeing as I had plenty of my own. ***W**hat do youâ€"what do you mean, you _felt_ my hung_**â€"***

Toothless growled, not fooled. ***D**on't**,"** he warned. ***A**nswer the question**."**

Licking my lips nervously, I glanced around, unable to meet his eyes. ***U**hâ€"| maybe yesterday morning**?"**

Toothless's eyes widened and his wings drooped. ***Y**ou went a full day and a half _and_ a night without food**?"** Wincing, I nodded. ***Y**ouâ€"you _idiot**!***_***

Aaand there it was. "I had to!" I started raising my arms defensively. "Berk's on a food shortageâ€"other people needed itâ€"

"More than the smallest Squish they've got_**?" he growled, lifting a paw to shove at my thin chest. "Even the stupidest dragon will feed their smallest young before themselvesâ€"sometimes I really doubt squish intelligence but I think here it's yours_ I should be worried about**!"

"Hey**!"

"No**!" Toothless snapped, teeth showing in his anger. "You don't get to be insulted! You get to sit down_**â€" He shoved his nose into my chest, only enough to knock me onto my rear, "â€"shut up**â€"

Toothless dragged his tongue across my entire face, leaving me wet and not a little nauseated, but the pain still tingling across my eye and cheek faded slightly, treated with the semi-medicinal dragon slime. He pulled away and made a disgusted sound, smacking his lips as if he were trying to get rid of the taste, before glowering at me.

"â€"And you will eat_**," he finished, jerking his head to the pile of fish to my immediate right. "No arguments**!"

Looking up at his angry eyes, I sighed and nodded, getting to my feet. He let me, watching me closely as I picked up some driftwood, not even caring if it was a little wet and started putting it into a pile.

I knelt next to it and took out my strike-a-light, and a blazing fire was drying and burning even the dampest wood in the pile in seconds. Selecting a fish from the pile, I cleaned it, gutted it with my seaxe, and stuck it through a thin, sharp stick for roasting.

Toothless huffed something about "****_**R**idiculous Squish eating habit**s**_**** but, seeing that I was preparing a meal, laid down on one side of the fire, putting the pile of fish between his front paws. Hesitant despite knowing he would never hurt me, I went forward and sat against his side, relaxing when he didn't start yelling at me again.

I put the fish over the fire to cook and earned a snort. "That ruins the best parts**," Toothless pointed out.

"For a dragon**," I returned. "Eating raw fish is pretty disgusting to us squishes**."

Olive branches, from both sides. Toothless huffed, and I smiled a little, then felt it fade. "I**'mâ€| I'm sorry I didn't tell you. About the food thing**," I said, still finding the sound of apologetic crooning coming from my mouth strange, even after two months of it.

He breathed deeply, my scaly seat shifting underneath me. "A**nd I'm sorry I never noticedâ€"though I think that might have something

to do more with _you_ than my own observational skills**."**

I chuckled nervously. "Uhâ€| yeah. Maybe." He rolled his eyes. "Soâ€| earlier?"

Toothless glanced at me, then at the fish, and seemed to take the _in process of cooking_ as a good enough substitute for _while you're eating_. **"I** never had a mother to tell me nesting tales, or nestmates to share them with**."**

My lips twitched sympathetically. **"S**o we're not that different after all**."**

"Quiet, Squish, I'm trying to talk here. Or would you rather not understand what happened up there**?"** I closed my mouth, mimed locking it. Toothless gave me a strange lookâ€| somehow I doubted the dragon knew what a lock and key wereâ€|but continued. **"R**egardless of my lack of a hatchling nest, I've still heard the tales mothers tell their young. One of them was about how, centuries ago, in lands far away across oceans and continents, men would ride dragons**."**

"Waitâ€|"there are others**?"**

Toothless shrugged. **"O**nce upon a time. You're still the first _Viking_ Squish rider, probably. But anyway, these riders, the ones who grew really close to their partners, a few of them were said to learn Dragonese, form a connection that strong with their dragon**."**

I frowned. **"B**ut I've been able to speak Dragonese for weeks now, since the day we met**,"** I pointed out, confused. **"I** thought that was a Gift from Thor**?"**

"It is. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a balanceâ€|"you being unheard by one member of your family, but able to speak to another of your aerie**."** I opened my mouth to defend my father, but froze. I really _couldn't_ say he listened, not honestly. Wincing, I allowed the point, but still grumbled.

"You and your _balances_â€|"

Toothless slapped me lightly against the head with an ear for that one. **"I** wouldn't complain against the best explanation you've got**."** I had to admit _that_ point too. I really did hate it when he started making sense. **"M**y point is, we already had the connection of legends, _early_ onâ€| now, it's probably grown**."**

I gave him a weird look. **"G**rown**?"** I repeated. **"I**nt-into _what_? Toothless, I am a _human_â€|"well, like three-quarters human, at leastâ€|but then, _then_ I couldn't tell the difference between me and you! I couldn't tell if I was human or-or _dragon_**!"**

Toothless looked at me, curious. **"D**id it bother you**?"**

I spluttered, caught off-step, but couldn't lie. **"W**ellâ€|"no. Not really. I mean, it was _weird_ butâ€| notâ€| asâ€| _wrong_ as I would've thought something like that would be**!"** I said, hoping I

could convey my pure astonishment at my lack of feeling anything except surprise, to what had just happened.

Some of it must've reached him, because he smirked. "The two of us, Squish, we're an odd pair. A grandson to and the creation of a god, close as we are? I've never heard of anything like it."

"Yeah," I agreed, turning the fish over the fire. A half-hour's cooking done in five minutes sometimes it was nice, having that affect on flames. "Yeah, me neither." I sighed and rubbed at my face, wincing when I hit the wounded spots. "Which probably means we have no idea what's going to happen to us over the years."

Toothless chuckled. "Nope," he agreed. He nudged my back, getting my attention back to his face. "But where would the fun in life be, if we always knew where we were going and what was going to happen?"

I sighed and sent him a look. "I don't think our ideas of fun line up exactly, bud."

He laughed. "Well, at least this way, flying will be easier," he pointed out, taking a cod and biting it in half before swallowing.

That was a very good point. The instinct apparently instilled into us both meant that I wouldn't need to constantly consult a cheat sheet, or pause to make sure it was right; neither would he have to glance back to see what I wanted him to do, if I didn't say it aloud.

"That felt amazing," I said, caught up in the memory of the vertical climb. "You know before the whole nearly-falling-to-our-deaths part. It was so cool! I felt like I could see all of Midgard, and the wind in my hair! And it was us holding us up! Just us! I can really see why you missed it so much."

Toothless gave me a sweet, gummy smile before his eyes rolled back. I paused, staring at him, before he hocked up the head of the fish he'd just swallowed, letting it slide off his tongue and onto the ground.

"There," he said, proud.

I cringed. "Urgh" Toothless, I just told you about raw fish!

He gave me a confused look. "But it's not raw, I just..."

"...threw it up, which is a lot worse than just raw." I lifted my stick. "Thanks, but I'm good with this."

Toothless didn't look any less bewildered. "But you ate it, back at the cove, that first day."

The memory of _that_ half-fish made me shudder involuntarily. "Bud, no offence," I said, twisting to face him fully, "but back then, you were a twelve-foot-high-while-sitting-down _predator_ with a good 900 pounds on me and a mouth big enough to fit my head _and_ shoulders. You told me to eat the nasty fish? I ate the nasty fish. I was just thankful _you_ weren't eating _me_."

He squinted, thoughtful, and then growled, displaying his fangs. ****"E**at the fish, Squish**."****

I snorted, not afraid in the least. ****"A**nd I repeatâ€”_back then_. _Now_, I know that you're just a big sarcastic baby who can't take a single word against his so-called 'artwork' without sulking for a good three hours**."****

****"M**y artwork is brilliant**!"**** he protested, acting insulted. ****"Y**our weak Squishy eyes just can't appreciate a true masterpiece**!"****

I threw my head back and laughed, Toothless joining in alongside me. More than happy to just spend time with my best friend, it took a moment before I really heard the squawking and chattering from just over the shore.

When the sound did register, I snapped my head forwards. Four Terrible Terrorsâ€”a mixture of colors between green and orange and redâ€”were flying towards us, hissing and spitting.

Slightly nervous and remembering the sudden and fierce attack that Tuffnut's nose had endured, I drew back a little. Beside me, Toothless released a wordless warning growl andâ€”hugged the fish closer.

(Nice to see what his priority was here.)

They landed not too far away, and, putting a hand on Toothless's flank for leverage, I almost stoodâ€”except they weren't coming for me, they went for the fish at Toothless's head. Were these guys fish-eaters too, like Night Furies apparently were?

Almost as if he'd read my mind, Toothless growled, ****"T**hey're scavengersâ€”thieves, really. If they're not in a large flock, they'll go after anything any stupid dragon isn't intelligent enough to guard**."****

One of the Terrorsâ€”the red oneâ€”was a little braver than his buddies and came close to Toothless's head. He bared his teeth at the tiny thing, and in the meantime, the green dragon snatched the fishhead he'd meant for me.

Toothless glanced at me, but I shrugged. "Let him have it, I wasn't going to eat it." He grumbled at the waste of fish, but didn't attack the little guy.

The other Terrors weren't so understanding. The orange one snuck by and tried to grab a biteâ€”Greenie wasn't having any of that, flaring his wings in warning before letting out a shot that looked like a miniature of a Nadder's fire.

It came out big and hot, slamming against Orange and sending him

sprawling. Even Greenie looked surprised at the heat of his own super-charged blast and I chuckled. "Sorry about that," I called to the unfortunate victim, slipping my finished meal off the stick.

***D**on't encourage them, Squiâ€"what in Niflheim**?"**

I looked over and saw him watching what looked like a fish _walking upright_, and couldn't blame him for his completely confused face. Another green guy, this one with a little less red on his back, walked out of the pile with the tail of the fish in his jaws. I had to cover my mouth to hide another chuckle.

Toothless was less amused. ***T**hat's not yours**!"** he growled before snatching the head. There was a short tug-of-warâ€"no prize for guessing the winnerâ€"before Toothless swallowed the thing whole and gurgled a laugh at the fallen back Terror.

The little Terror was apparently braverâ€"or, more likely, stupiderâ€"than he looked. He got back onto all fours and scratched at the stone ground, trying to show off claws not bigger than my pinky finger.

O**h, this should be good**, Toothless said with a smirk.

"Oh gods, poor little guy," I said, already seeing where this was going. Sympathy aside, I sat back and started eating my fish, content to watch peacefully as my stomach rejoiced at food entering it after so long.

GÃ³râ€"our word for 'brave', which I quickly decided to call the poor idiot (just to myself, though) because maybe a good name would help the gods grace him with more common senseâ€"started growling at Toothless. He reared up, the familiar hiss of a dragon about to fire coming from his mouth as he opened it.

Toothless shot a miniscule blast into the open mouth.

His stomach ballooned with flames. The force of the hit made GÃ³r flip where he stood, and he landed on his head, his nostrils smoking. Dazed and barely able to walk, he stumbled away from his lost prize.

S**tupid lizard**, Toothless smirked, triumphant. Big surprise there.

I laughed. "Not so fireproof on the inside, are ya?" I asked, since he'd understand Norse better than my Night Fury Dragonese dialect. I knelt up from Toothless's side and picked up one of the smaller fish, tossing it to him. "Here ya go."

Any daze was shaken off almost instantly at the sight of free food. He swallowed it pretty much wholeâ€"I had to wonder how it fit, seeing as it was nearly the size of his entire bodyâ€"and I sat back up against Toothless, smiling as he looked over to me.

Almost hesitant, GÃ³r stepped forward, then nudged his way underneath my arm. Awed, I watched as the little Terror settled down, curling up and purring loudly, nothing more than a fire-breathing, scaly cat by my side. Just as hesitant, I laid my hand on his back,

rubbing around the small spines.

/**_**O**h, good day. Nice squish, good food, warm belly, and now, mmmm sleep**â€|/**_*

Toothless snorted. ***I**ntelligent, aren't they**?***

I looked between my cousin, still guarding the fish that I had a feeling he had caught more for the village than himself (he'd already had his daily meal, after all), and the little dragon sleeping soundly at my side. My eyebrows met as I realized that if anyone back on Berk had seen this picture, something that I couldn't take anything but peaceful from, they'd pull out axes and swords and shields and every other weapon on the island to kill them both.

And what had they done? Besides catch some fish, argue over a little food? Toothless himself had tasted my own blood not a half hour ago, when he licked the slices on my face, and had looked disgusted by itâ€"not intrigued, like Gobber insisted the Nightmare who'd taken his hand had been.

"Everything we know about you guys is wrong," I realized softly.

Toothless turned to me, his eyes gentle. He nudged me in the side, wordlessly crooning in comfort. Grateful, I scratched his head before sighing and looking up at the sun.

A**lmost midday**, I pointed out. ***W**e should probably get back to Berk, bud**."***

He snorted in agreement, standing and shaking himself off. ***W**e'll need to make two trips**,*** he pointed out. I gave him a strange look, even though I thought I already knew why. Toothless pointed his head to the pile below him. ***U**nless you think you can carry all of that back to your Nest in one big armful, we're going to need to get that basket from the cove first**."*** The look he gave me was serious. ***N**ow that we can fly together, we can work on feeding your village. No more of this no eating Stone-Swallower droppings, got it?***"

I chuckled at his phrase for Gronkle \$hit, and nodded, grinning broadly. So this was what it was like to be really cared about.

(I left a rather stunned GÃ³Ã°r with strict instructions to not let anyone get to the fish. Even though he was still staring at the talking squish! as we flew off, when we got back with the basket, not a single one had been taken.)

* * *

><p>Unrealistically, some part of me had expected to maybe be able to sneak into the village with the basket on my backâ€"but to be honest, no part of me can be classified as stealthy, so I knew that probably wasn't going to happen, the moment I had the thought.

More realistically, I'd expected to maybe see Ruff and Tuff, or Snotlout or Fishlegs on the way to the storage shed, and explain that I'd spent the morning fishing to get as big a catch as I'd managed.

I'd even expected to see Gobber or any of the other villagers, who would've clapped me on the back and taken the basket for me, praising me for my growth into Vikingness "even though ye're still a bi' on th' skinny si'!"

What I hadn't expected was what I found.

Dad had left with three absolutely packed ships of Vikingsâ€”a good 100 men and women, all of whom I knew almost personally, warriors of the land and sea and veteran dragon-killers. Though it had been quite a while since they left, few of us on the island had gotten too worriedâ€”trips to search for the Nest sometimes took months. It had only been one and a half, maybe two; if they hit a storm and went off-course, which had happened before, they wouldn't've even have reached Helheim's Gate by now.

(And my dad went on pretty much every last tripâ€”you see why I had to learn to fend for and feed myself early.)

I was walking down the path from the forest, a smile still on my face from the morning's flight and the other events, and the beautiful day that was still bright over my headâ€”no idea that it would darken in a matter of minutes.

Halfway through the village, I realized how quiet it was. This time of day, most of the Vikings should've been out and about, working and tending to their houses or farm animals, but the village was basically deserted.

The thing in my chest squeezed and worry pooled in my stomach. Swallowing, I looked around for someone, anyâ€”

A flash of blonde hair and a spiked skirt. Probably not the best company with her current opinion of me, but still better than nothing.

"Astrid!" I called out, jogging forward. She turned around, and I registered her surprise as she picked up on my wounds before I sawâ€”the sight of wetness in her eyes made me stop where I stood.

Cold worry froze into icy dread. Astrid quickly spun around, showing me her back as she lifted her arms, probably to dry her face. "What, Hiccup?" she snarled, still not looking at me.

"Whaâ€” Astrid, what happened?" I asked, shocked.

"You know what happened!"

"Noâ€”no I really don't," I assured her. She looked over her shoulder and scowled darkly, then saw the basket on my back. "I was fishing all day," I explained, gesturing and hoping she didn't see the massive catch as odd. "Didâ€”did something happen?"

What could make Astrid cry? Tough, Valkyrie Astrid, best of the trainees and axe-swinging shield-maiden who didn't so much as bat an eyelid at any of the dragons in the Ring?

Only one thing came to mind, and I swallowed thickly. "Oh godsâ€”is Erikâ€”?"

"He's fine," Astrid cut me off, something in her eyes softening even as walls came up. "Justâ€"go down to the docks."

The docks? Whyâ€|?

Oh no.

Horror made me pale, and only a long-entrenched instinct kept me from running full-speed down the ramps and paths through the village.

Despite the height of the sun, the world was already darkening at this point, SÃ³l's brightnessâ€"no matter how happy and warm on this once-wonderful dayâ€"dimming quickly as the air and my chest turned cold.

Only eight of the thirty ships to Berk's name that would be out todayâ€"five fishing, three war. (Really, pretty much all thirty be used for war, since we're _Vikings_, but fifteen were built expressly for the purpose of war alone.) The fishing boats wouldn't even think about being back for another few hours, and the 22 others were in dry dock until they were needed.

So the only ones currently at the _actual _docks had to beâ€|

The edge of one of the steppes let me see the docks from above. Three longboats and one hundred warriors had left Berk, weapons gleaming and shields held high, cheered on as they left sight of the island.

The single ship that returned was nearly blown to pieces.

I could see parts where boards had been nailed over holes that would've sunk it. The sail was partially eaten, and there was a burnt hole in the other sideâ€"it hung, useless and sad, defeated.

One ship could not hold one hundred men.

My singular relief was that I could already hear the familiar booming voice of my father, making orders and directing the wounded to the healer's hut. Helga had reunited with Jokesend and Gerdy and were having those who were still strong enough, carry those too injured to walk, up the hill.

Names and faces, friends and extended family all, sped in front of my mind's eye and a small, Dragonese whimper escaped my lips.

I don't know how many times I tripped over myself trying to get down to the docksâ€"my eyes were glued to the steady march of slump-shouldered, hastily-bandaged warriors moving lethargically over the ramps.

"It's Hiccupâ€|"

"What're ye doin' out here, lad?"

"What happened to yer face?"

"This isn't a place for a boyâ€""

"Go back inside!"

The tone behind the words was different, and it made my chest ache. Just as I always had, I ignored them all, ducking around hands that sought to land on my shoulders or stop me in my tracks.

I didn't even know what I was looking forâ€"not until my ears picked up a familiar voice, releasing a cry of pure, unadulterated _grief_.

The sound made my head spin with horror because that wasâ€"that wasâ€"

Ansa, sobbing over a body lying far too still with a tearful Bjorn in the background, was a sight that settled into my heart as one of my worst memories.

"No." The basket of fish hit the deck with a dull _thump_. "Noâ€"no, no no, pleaseâ€"

I ran forward, pushing people aside, eyes already watering. Hands wrapped around my shoulder and arms but I pulled against the strangers holding me back becauseâ€"

Ansa looked up, her grey eyes red and broken. Now visible underneath was the charred face of Germdish.

"NO!" I shrieked, throwing myself forward. "NO! No, not Germdish, pleaseâ€"Petri! Petri, no, _no!_"

More hands joined the two holding me back but I didn't care because that was _Petri_, who'd laughed at my sarcasm and helped me with my seaxe, who never scowled at my inventions and helped me so _much_â€"

I kicked furiously, trying to get to him because he _couldn't_ be gone. **"N**o, please**,"** I cried out, the sounds little more than whimpers and grunts, desperate and grieving already. "Petri! _Petri!_"

Bjorn was suddenly in front of me, cupping my face with his wide hands, calloused from hard work just like his brother'sâ€"tears dropped from my eyesâ€"and kneeling in front of me.

"_Hikka_," he said, my name in the mothertongue Ansa had taught him, something only he and Germdish ever called meâ€"| _Germdishâ€"| _Hikka_, you shouldn't be hereâ€"| "

"Bjorn, no, please, that'sâ€" "

"I know. I know, _vÃshÃsn_â€" " another nickname, and it made me whimper, "â€"and he is one of many. But you're still too young for thisâ€"go be with your family. There will be a funeral for him this afternoon, with the f-fifty others, you can honor him then, butâ€"but please. Go be with your family."

Since you can, he left unsaid.

I collapsed where I stood, grief and shock leaving me empty inside.

Bjorn patted me on the shoulderâ€"more gentle than any other Viking on Berkâ€"and turned back to his brother's body.

"Come on, cousin."

But the voiceâ€"the languageâ€"was all wrong. That was _Snotlout_ speaking, not the prideful dragon I'd come to love as true family.

I looked over my shoulderâ€"he and Fishlegs had been the ones to hold me back. Fish had the beginnings of tears in his eyes and Snotlout looked more serious than I'd ever seen him, any hint of malice gone at the tragedy before us. To Vikings, family was centralâ€"we might pound and hate on one another, but when the going got truly tough, we stuck together. And the entire village knew how close I wasâ€"| I _had_ been_ with Germdish.

But I couldn't handle the change in tense I had to make in that sentence, and I couldn't handle their sympathy right now. I yanked out of their arms, scrubbed at my face with my sleeves, and ran back up the ramp.

I was halfway through the village before I heard Gobber's "Hicca! Yer fatherâ€"

"I'll talk to him _later_, Gobber!" I shouted, not looking back and only barely remembering to say it in Norse.

He grabbed my arm, stopping me for a moment and turning me to face him. "Hicca," he said, his voice gentler than normal. He paused for a moment, probably seeing the injuries on my face from Toothless's fin, but shook his head and continued. "Ye shoul' be with yer family righ' nowâ€"ye shouldn' be alone, th' firs' time ye're grievin'. Germdish wouldn' want you ta be aloâ€"

I didn't listen to the restâ€"dam# the consequences, I _ran_ out of there and into the woods.

* * *

><p>"_**T**oothless**!**_****

Toothless's head snapped up immediatelyâ€"that was not the cheerful, teasing greeting he was used to. **"H**iccup**?"** he asked. The Squish soundedâ€"desperate, saddened. Worry ignited like a second fire in his stomach, bringing him to his feet. **"H**iccup**!"**

It wasn't half a moment before a familiar brown blur appeared in the cove. The worry grew into concernâ€"Hiccup didn't often run into the cove, usually only to avoid being seen by the others from the Nest.

When the blur tripped and Hiccup sprawled out onto the ground, the flame of concern flared into a wildfire. The little Squish was clumsy as anything, but he was always strangely graceful when he was nothing but that Thor-blessed _blur_â€"him tripping, running that quickly?

Something was wrong. _Very_ wrong.

"Hiccup**!"** Toothless called, leaping over to his small aerie.

Thin limbs were shaking as he pulled himself upright, and he could only stand back and watch as Hiccup got back up.

When he saw his face, Toothless froze. The dragon had learned a lot about human emotions over the last few weeks, just by watching his Squish, who had so much more than the anger and ferocity he'd seen on squishes during the raids. Happiness, sarcasm, joy, disgust, unimpressedâ€| This one, though, he'd only seen a glimpse of before.

Back when Hiccup had told him that he didn't deserve a sire like his, that his father should have left him out to dieâ€|his eyes had glistened, wetness dripping down his face. Pink lips had been tight, but the cheeks around them loose, and the middle ends of those scraps of fur over his eyes had been angled upwards. Toothless had seen that expression and tagged it as sadness in his mind.

But now? There were tracks down Hiccup's face, even his uninjured eye red and swollen. His mouth was open and gasping for air, and his cheeks were spotted red. His whole expression was open, and completely shattered.

Sadness had been a tasteâ€|this was nothing less than devastated.

W**haâ€| Cousin, what happened

Hiccup sniffed, pulled himself to his feetâ€|and threw his arms around Toothless's neck. Toothless's ears flipped back, surprised as the little Squish's shoulders started moving, heaving with every breath as he sobbed into his shoulder.

Confused and shocked, and not just a little bit scared, Toothless shoved away any and all of his own questions. Whatever had happened, it had brought his aerie back to where he knew he would find comfortâ€|and comfort he would give.

Toothless lifted onto his back legs, moving his paws so that Hiccup's arms were wrapped around his middle. Grasping the boy's shoulders with his clawsâ€|staying impossibly gentle, so as not to pierce the uselessly fragile skin squishes were covered inâ€|he lifted him before easing onto his side and pulling him into a tight hug, wrapping every limb he had around his cousin and plunging them both into the darkness of his cocooned wings.

Toothless purred and crooned as best he knew, ducking his nose into the soft tuft of fur on Hiccup's head. He smelled like he always didâ€|of squish, which stunk, but also fire and metal and the skins they called leather, and now like air and the sea, from their earlier flightâ€|and Toothless breathed in slowly, ruffling the strands and hopefully calming him in the process.

Hiccup's hand moved from his side to his head, pulling him down closer and holding him tight. It wasn't exactly the most comfortable position, but it wasn't bad for a flexible dragon like himself, and even if it had been painful, Toothless would've held himself there for as long as his cousin needed.

It turned out to be a while.

With every passing minute, the worry grew in his stomach. Just touching had succeeded in calming one another before—the only other complete embrace he'd given Hiccup had sent the Squish to sleep in a few heartbeats.

Was their connection at fault, somehow broken? Or, more likely, some instinct told Toothless, was what had happened to his aerie just that horrible?

Worried, Toothless huffed air through his nostrils into Hiccup's hair. He wished, badly, that Hiccup were able to tell him what had happened, but in his state, he didn't seem ready to say a single word, much less give an entire explanation. For now, at least, his little cousin was closed off, only able to release tears.

“Fine then,” Toothless decided. “I'll just wait until he opens up.”

Hiccup paused in his crying, his shoulders settling a little, now only shifting sharply as he sniffed. Toothless blinked in surprise and then—

—just like it had in the air, warmth started flowing into him from where he was touching Hiccup.

Toothless had decided, right after that first flight this morning, that little flame, no matter how vulgar, was one of his best-fitting names for the boy. It was as if the thin Squish hid a rock-melting fire somewhere deep in his chest, held close and revealed rarely, in a cage as strong and tight as a Stone-Swallower's jaw. When it did decide to show itself, it moved like tree-sap, slow and thick but almost solid, and it would sink deep into every last part of Toothless's entire body and, eventually, hit upon the fire in Toothless's own core, resonating brightly and completely filling him up.

At the very moment when it touched that core spark that made every dragon everything a dragon was, outside of flight, Hiccup's own grief crashed into Toothless like a massive gust in a storm, shocking him into numb thoughtlessness like a gale would send him out of control in the air.

It was heavy and thick, all-encompassing and black in a way his own scales weren't. Seeking comfort for a grief that wasn't even his, Toothless held on tighter to his little aerie.

What part of the Night Fury that was still solely him wondered just who this person had been, that Hiccup would mourn them so badly. Had his sire died?

Hiccup shuddered in his hold, and shook his head against his chest. Toothless blinked in surprise, but before he could say anything, a set of images—memories—barraged into his mind.

“An older squish, Germdish, with a crooked smile that had a gap-tooth and a rugged jaw, laughing heartily at something he'd just said.”

“No, you hold it like this, when you're using your left,” Germdish said, demonstrating. He tried himself and the blade went

forward with a lot more force than his right hand had ever been able to manage. "Good!"_

â€"_Your name in our language is _Hikka_. I'm Petri, Bjorn is Karhu. And you, by the way, are also _vÃ¶hÃ¶n_â€"Little Bit!"_

â€"_â€|Dad, I _really_ don't think you should go! Please, Iâ€|"_

_ "Why not?"_

_ "Iâ€"I don't know, I justâ€"I have a feeling. Please, Dad, call off the search!"_

â€"_a rugged jaw covered in black soot, burns that would never heal over the arms he'd used to shift his stance for the seaxe, the shoulders that once shook with laughter at his sarcasmâ€|_

â€|When Toothless finally came out of the memories, breaking through their surface like he would water, he unfolded his wings to be able to see better.

SÃ³l had nearly gone past the horizon, but was still casting plenty of light in the cove for a night-creature like himself to see.

Hiccup was still holding onto him tightly, his face pressed to his chest. Still feeling the overbearing grief from his cousin, still connected to him somehow, just less than before, Toothless lifted a paw and gently pried him away a little, hoping to look him in the eye.

The Squish looked up, and Toothless froze, surprised for a moment.

His eyes had changed. Nothing you would notice from afar, but if you looked closely enoughâ€| the colored part had grown a little wider, a little greener, though there was still whiteâ€"the pupil was a narrow slit, instead of the circle Toothless always remembered it being. He vaguely realized they looked a bit like his own.

Another wave of grief made him shake the thoughts away. Hiccup's _eyes_ didn't matter right nowâ€"_he_ did.

C**ousin**, Toothless crooned. ***C**ousin, it's alright**."**

***N**o it's not**."**

It was childish, and Toothless could tell Hiccup knew that, their minds still strangely connected as they were. Hiccup sighed and scraped his fingers across his hide, making round balls of his hands. ***I** justâ€| he was the only one who didn't make fun of me, for a long time. He taught me a lotâ€"how to use my seaxe, that I was left-handed, how to not take others so seriously***â€|"**

***I** know, I saw**."** Hiccup looked up, confused, and Toothless smiled wryly. ***R**emember how you said we don't know what will happen to us as our bond grows**?"**

Y**eah, but I never _said_ anything about Germdish**, Hiccup

said, confused. **"I just _thought_ about h*i*"** His eyes grew wide. **"_no._ You can't be serious?"**

"G*er*mdish, or I think he was also called Petri?" Toothless nodded as Hiccup paled*"*he could tell it was out of returned grief at hearing the name, and not horror at having a dragon literally in his head. **"I'm sorry you lost such a close friend*"*.**

Hiccup whimpered, sounding like a lost hatchling. **"I shouldn't I shouldn't be _like_ this*"*,** he said, wiping at his strange eyes but keeping contact with Toothless's scales. **"I mean, we lost _fifty_ people, but I should be proud, that they're all going to Valhalla and F*l*kvangr. I should be happy, celebrating their lives with the rest of the tribe but*"* but I just _can't_, I*"***

Another tear fell, dripping wet onto Toothless's scales. Unlike the others, this wasn't part of a flow*"*it was just one, unable to be held back.

"He was almost something like a brother, for the longest time," Hiccup whispered. "And now*"*I want to celebrate his life, I do, but*"* I'll never see him again. I can't*"* get over that. Idea. I just*"* can't."

Toothless's heart ached*"*he'd felt that this Petri had been important, but to the point of being family?

He turned his head down and nosed lightly under Hiccup's downturned chin, bringing it up. The white of his eyes were red, and Toothless couldn't stop a comforting croon before he spoke.

"N*ight* Furies don't have nest-mates*"*. It felt like the hundredth time he'd said so, and the times when it had been true seemed like nothing but a big, uneventful blur to Toothless now*"*even if he had been able to fly on his own, his life had only really started when he found someone to care about. **"O*ther* dragons, they have rituals and mourning periods, when their aerie die. We don't have family to grieve, but when someone we know and were close to dies, there's a Gift Hel gave us*"*.**

Hiccup turned his head, curiosity appearing in his eyes, a spark Toothless didn't realize had been gone, or that he had missed. **"W*hat*?"** he asked.

Toothless turned his head up, looking into the darkening red of the dusk. He took a deep breath and set his voice to a very specific pitch before releasing it, long and slow, into the air.

It was a clear sound, not cutting but rather soaring through the air, weaving its way into currents and flowing with them. Deep, but rising in tone, as soft and as distinct his own wings, it held in that moment*"*every iota of the grief Toothless had felt for the man named Petri, who'd been a brother to his Squish. The grief wasn't released, because releasing would mean letting it go entirely, but instead shared with the entire world.

The cry was heart-broken, the emotion carrying better than the sound ever could. Tears returned to Hiccup's eyes, but the Squish only turned his head up and joined his cousin in mourning.

><p>Of the fifty fallen men and women, three bodies were returned to Berk. Stoick did not want to tell his son that the only reason Germdish was one of them, was because he'd died of his wounds slowly, on the way back to the village.<p>

When the fire had burned itself out, the Gyoja filled fifty earthen vases with the ash, and set it on the same boat that they had returned on. There was no salvaging it, after the attack it had taken, and it had only been by Njãr's will that they'd made it back at all. It was a perfect vessel for their final send-off.

Silence reigned on the beach as they watched it flow. Some tears were shed—children whose parents wouldn't return from this voyage; spouses and shield brothers who cried with pride that their loved ones would be entered the greatest Hall to exist, that they would aid Oðin before the final battle of Ragnarök.

**AAAAAAAA00000000000000000000000000â€ | **

"Whatâ€¦what _is_ that?" Ruffnut asked, sounding awed as she looked to the sky.

AAAAAAAAA00000000000000000000o0000ooooooooâ€|

"Reallyâ€"really sad, soft thunder," Astrid murmured, turning to look at the whole horizon. It was impossible to pick out one direction for the sourceâ€"it seemed to be coming from the sky itself.

Fishlegs swallowed, a little choked up. "They say that wolves howl, when they lose a member of their pack," he said quietly, gaining attention. "And they say that it's the saddest thing anyone's ever

heard."

"Maybe Tyr himself is mourning the loss of such great warriors," Chief Stoick said, murmurs of agreement meeting his words. "Shield brothers they were, all."

Gobber looked at the sky, thoughtful. "Nah," he said, too quietly for anyone but Astrid to hear. She looked at him, surprised he would deny the comforting words of the Chief. "Not Tyr. No' with tha' thunderin'.

"Thor."

* * *

><p>*GIANT'S CAUSEWAAAAAAAAAAAAAY. Fiann Mac Cool raised the pillars of volcanic rock in order to help a giant who planned to fight him but couldn't swim across the Irish Sea from Scotland. He didn't know how big the giant was, until he saw him coming, so he had his wife help him out; he dressed up like a baby.

The giant arrived and found a baby the size of a full grown man, and nothing of his opponent. But the baby started wailing, and then stomped him on the foot, nearly crushing it. The giant, seeing how vicious and large the inhabitants of the island were, ran because if this was the baby, he didn't wanna meet Daddy.

Gotta go, gotta go fast. Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

~Tibki

15. Chapter 15

Hey y'all,

My flight leaves in four hours, and I'm being picked up in one, so here's an early chapter! Hopefully, I'll be able to post tomorrow's on time, but no promises; if it doesn't come tomorrow, the day after will have two. :)

Oh God. Where'd the summer go?

Hope you like it! Thank you to everyone who reviewed last chapter!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FIFTEEN_

I hadn't ever imagined that doing the dragon equivalent of howling at Gmot could be comforting, but it was. While the rest of the village held their pyre and moved to the Great Hall for lots and lots of beer drinking and feasting—or as much as we could risk with a possible famine on the horizon—I spent a few hours mourning in my own way,

releasing human tears and dragon wails together.

Toothless stuck by me the entire time, a comforting and sympathetic presence. It wasn't until a while passed that I realized, with that weird fire was connecting us, no doubt he was feeling the same grief I was.

When I'd tried to pull away, he held me tighter. **"We're aerie, Cousin",** he'd said. **"When we grieve, we grieve together".**

Those words, and what had happened this morning, echoed around my head long after I'd gone back to the village—"no way_ I wouldn't be missed long enough to spend another night with Toothless, not with Dad back on Berk—"back to the forge.

My little room in the back, dimly lit and covered in schematics and papers—"the older ones of weapons either hidden by or knocked to the floor by sketches of Toothless in flight"—this was where I went when I needed to think and couldn't risk running. With most of the village out and about and crying for draconic blood, I didn't want to get caught out there.

I laid my head on my desk, heart thumping hard in my chest, grief mixing with sorrow and conflict. Up until now, I'd been able to ignore the fact that, well—|

While I was learning about dragons, how they thought and how they worked, even bits and pieces of their beliefs and families, everyone else was learning how to kill them.

Of course, I'd known that, on the surface. It was a little hard to miss the weapons everyone brought into the Ring, or the bloody talk some of the other teenagers shared, talk that I tended to tune out in favor of keeping what little food I'd had in my stomach at the time where it belonged. But now, after seeing the affects of another search, up close?

This wasn't just proving ourselves, or honoring our families, like Astrid said. This was preparing us for a blood-drenched war.

War with the same beings I'd spent the last six weeks befriending.

Petri was dead and so were so many others and I knew something in me should've been angry about that—"but all I felt was regret, that I'd never see that awkward grin or hear a laugh at my sarcasm again. The tribe was calling for vengeance—" I'd spent the afternoon crying into the shoulder of a dragon, separated from Petri's killer only by species.

I couldn't keep this up. Things were getting serious—"life-or-death serious", and not in the normal way that meant Gobber had thrown us in front of fangs and fire—"but I knew I'd never be able to lead or even join a score of men marching against anything with scales.

It had been so much easier to just—" it wasn't that I pretended that I didn't know that I was betraying my tribe's oldest philosophy by refusing to kill dragon, because I did know what I was doing. And I

knew _why_, and I didn't feel bad for doing it.

But I'd just never really realized that hundreds, literally _hundreds_ of my people had _died_ over the past three centuries, for that abandoned philosophy. Fathers and mothers and brothers, who you would've spent just the other day drinking and laughing with, and then they're just gone. People like Petri. The Viking Way was weighed down with hundreds of human souls, and through rejecting that way, it almost felt like I was rejecting them and their memory. The feeling wasn't nice.

â€|Still, as tragic as it was, everything they'd died for was _wrong._ The dragons weren't the ruthless killers we thought they were. I _knew_ that.

No one else did, though.

I was so deep in my thoughts, flicking my charcoal stick up and down my desk, that I almost didn't hear my dad come in. Almostâ€"he only made the entire doorframe into my workshop shake when he tried to fit through it.

"Dad!" I yelped, shooting to my feet. Panic rose in my throat as I realized my pictures of Toothless were _everywhere_, and in full view. Scrambling, I tried to turn over or cover as many as possibleâ€"he wouldn't recognize him as a Night Fury, but still, better to not risk anything. "You're back! I, uhâ€"I knew that, actuallyâ€"uh, G-Gobber's not here, so, uhâ€|"

"I know." Dad was big, filled up most of the space in the roomâ€"feeling a little claustrophobic, I eased back from him, into a corner. "Listen, sonâ€| abou' Germdishâ€|"

I flinched, a pang shooting through my heart. "I don'tâ€| Dad, please. Can we notâ€| talk about hiâ€"that? Please?"

He frowned. "Hiccup, there's no shame in missingâ€"

"_Please_, Dad," I begged. "I justâ€|" Heat formed behind my eyes and I had to look back to my desk, unable to meet his gaze. "Dadâ€| you shouldn't've gone, I _told_ you, I-I _felt_â€|"

Dad's breath hitched behind me. He let it out slowly, and I screwed my eyes shut. "You were righ'. But they're all with the gods, son, in Valhalla and Freyja's Field. Whether or no' Germdish was born a Vikin', he died an honorable death, and is feastin' with OÃ°in righ' now."

That would be a comfort to me later, I knewâ€"I wished it was working now. "Is there something else you wanted, Dad?" I asked, eager to turn away from the subject and scrubbing at my eyes.

Dad, in a strange fit of tact, allowed it. He sighed and shifted where he stood. "Actually, yes. There is." His voice dropped low, serious. "You've been keepin' secrets."

The panic was backâ€"oh man, was the panic back! "Uh, uh, I-I have?" I squeaked, bending over as casually as I could to cover as many of the drawings as possible.

"Just how long did you think you could hide it from me?"

Oh gods. Oh gods. "I-I I don'tâ€¦ know what you areâ€¦"

"_Nothing happens_ on this island, without me hearin' about it."

"â€¦Oh?" I flinched. Toothless's cove was a twenty-minute walk away, at normal speeds. Terrifyingly close to the village, suddenly. I swallowed.

"So." He stepped forward, and I backed away, eyes widening in fear. "Let's _talk_," he said, strict and imposing as ever. "About tha' _dragon_."

He knew. Oh _Thor_ he knew about Toothless. "Oh gods. Dadâ€¦" "Dad, it's not what you think, I'm so sorryâ€¦" "I-I think I was gonna tell you, eventually, but I justâ€¦ didn't know how to, uhâ€¦"

Dadâ€¦ started _laughing_?

What in Hel's name?

Fearing for my cousin's life and my father's sanity, just a little bit, I laughed nervously along with him. Almost out of nowhere, a tiny flicker of hope started igniting in my chest. Could it really be that easyâ€¦ could he really have taken it that _well_? "You-you'reâ€¦ you're not upset?"

"_What?_" he snapped, grinning broadly underneath his moustache. "_Upse'_? I was _hopin'_ for this!"

Thatâ€¦ okay, that was stretching it a little. "Uhâ€¦ you-you were?"

"An' believe me, it only gets _better_!" he gushed, moving his hands as he spoke, the way he always did when he was excited. "Just wai' until you spill a Nadder's _guts_ for th' firs' time!" The only Nadder that came to mind was the half-starved, vain one in the Ring, and I felt sick. "An' moun' yer first Gronkle 'ead on a spear, or-or a Zippleback's blood coat yer hands! Wha' a feelin'!"

He tossed a hand into my shoulder and sent me flying into the shelf behind me. I slipped and fell into a basket of spare parts, and stared up at my father, horrified. _Slither and Trickyâ€¦_

"You really had me goin' there, son!" he said, laughing. "All those _years_ of the _worst Viking_ Berk has ever seen! All tha' time I nearly doubted yer mother's parentage!"

Any effort I'd made to stand back up was forgotten, and I slumped back into the basket, my limbs numb with shock and hurt. He'd neverâ€¦ said it out loudâ€¦

"OÃ°in, it was rough! I almost gave up on you," Dad kept going, looking to the ceiling. Something in my chest cracked and a tiny voice somewhere begged for him to stop talking, for me to stop listening, just someone to make it _stop_. "And all the while you were holdin' out on me, oh _Thor_ almighty!_"

A large hand slapped onto my shoulder, lifting me into a standing position. "Yer makin' yer ancestor's prou'," he said brightly, and the words felt like raw fish in my stomach. He looked back and found a stool, pulling it up to sit down. "Ah! With you doin' so well in th' Ring, we finally have somethin' ta talk about!"

Torn apart and beaten, the hope finally died. Dad wasn't understanding about Toothless—he didn't even know about him, and I knew now that that was nothing short of a blessing.

What in the name of all the Æsir would the Chief of a dragon-killing tribe do with a Night Fury?

It didn't bear thinking about.

Dad was sitting in front of me, almost on my level for the first time I could ever remember. Just slightly above mine, his eyes were wide and eager, like Toothless's when I brought him breakfast.

How long had I wanted this? To have his full attention, to be able to actually have a conversation with my father?

Now I had it, and, despite what he thought, we really had nothing to talk about.

I guess Dad seemed to pick up on that after a few silent seconds of pure and painful awkward, because he looked away, reached into his cape for something tied to his belt. "I, uh, brought you somethin'," he said. "Ta—ta keep you safe, in the Ring."

My eyes grew huge at the helmet in his hands. It was generally understood that a kid didn't get their first Viking helmet to wear in everyday life, until they'd done something to prove themselves—usually by showing off their bloodthirst. The twins, having gotten into their first brawl while still in the cradle, had been wearing theirs for as long as I could remember; Snotlout had had his since he was five and started pounding on me; even Fish had gotten his, after nearly going into a Viking blood rage when someone spilled some candle wax onto the Dragon Manual (the 'nearly' was why his helmet was so small).

The only teenagers who didn't wear ones on a daily basis were me and Astrid. She, unlike me, however, had one—just chose not to wear it, because the thick braid she wore past the nape of her neck got in the way.

The head-plate was wide and broad, and I could already tell it would be a good fit. The horns were from a young bull, not as wide as they could've been but thick and straight—horns were symbolic, when it came to helmets. The Jorgenson clan, as our closest relatives, had curling ram's horns, because they were always eager to butt heads about anything. The Thorstons' horns were thin, not very solid, but long—they were lethal, if not particularly stable.

As the Chief family of Berk, the Haddocks always kept bull and large cow horns—able to be calm and steady, important to daily life, but still not anything you'd want to trifle with. The horns were always big and sturdy, like us, and wicked sharp on the tips.

"Wow," I said, awed. He passed it over to me, and I laid a hand flat

on the top.

A white spark leapt from the metal and onto my thumbâ€”hissing "Ow!_" I nearly dropped it, but then froze, shock hitting me in another way.

The thing in my chest twanged sharply, and I could see the amazement in my Dad's eyes. "Waitâ€”was thisâ€”?"

"Yer mother's," he said, fierce pride and old grief overcoming his surprise. The thrum in my chest was suddenly less the thing behind my heart and more an old loss. "She andâ€” yer grandfather must want ye to have it. It's half of her breastplate."

I couldn't get my hand off the plate fast enough. He smiled, tapping his own helmet. "Matching set. Keeps herâ€” keeps her close, ya know?" That old pain filled my throat and I cleared it thickly. It wasn't the first time I wished I'd known herâ€”how much could she have told me about my Gifts, about living with this kind of secret, those few times I felt the weight on my shoulders?â€”and I knew it would be far from the last. "Wear it proudly," Dad instructed. "You deserve it. You held up your end of the deal."

I still didn't know what his side of the deal wasâ€”though if he figured it would be that he came back from the raid, I was more than happy to consider the deal done. But whether or not that was his part, I didn't say anything against itâ€”

â€”because despite everything, Dad was proud of me, for once. It was all a lie, but the sight of his eyes happy and looking at meâ€” I couldn't ruin that. Not even with the truth.

Still, not wanting the awkward to carry on for much longer, I exploded into a (unfortunately very fake) yawn. "Iâ€” should probably get to bed, it's late andâ€”"

"Er, yes, goodâ€”good talk," he said, standing. "I think we should do this againâ€”"

"Yeah, I'll see you back at the house, and uh, thanks for the, the breastthat."

Dad nodded sharply. "â€”Th' hat, an'â€”you must be tired, with training and Germdish and everyâ€”"

"Petri." My voice surprised even me, but I set my jaw and met my dad's surprised look steadily. "He was Petri, to his friends."

Dad hesitated. Once upon a time, he'd disapproved of me hanging around Karhu and Petri so oftenâ€”if the tribe that we'd gotten their mother from had returned to see that, he would've lost a lot of respect. But that had pretty much ended the first time Karhu saved me from a Gronkle's jaws, and whenâ€”when Petri had helped me with my seaxe.

"Petri, then," Dad said softly. "Righ'. Wellâ€”be back before midnight."

I nodded, knowing he was going to visit the injured in the healing houses before getting back to bed. "G'night, Dad."

With a nod and a tight squeeze through the door, he left my workroom. I sighed heavily, falling back onto my stool and dropping my head onto the table.

One of the sketches of Toothless's faceâ€”his unimpressed expression, with thin pupils and low earsâ€”stared me in the face in the low light.

A**w, Cousin**, I whined to the picture. ***W**hat'm I gonna do**?***

I hated to lie, but the truthâ€”that was nothing less than fatal.

* * *

><p>The night had been as picturesque as the day, but the next morning fit the mood a lot betterâ€”grey and bleak, not as wet as it could've been but colder.<p>

When I'd woken up, Dad had been in the main floor of the house, cooking breakfast. Remembering Toothless's fury when he found out that I'd been skipping, I grabbed a loaf of bread and a small amount of cheese from the shelf near the back.

"Where're you goin' this early?" Dad asked from the fire, looking at me with a high eyebrow and a pleased smile. "Practice?"

"Ehâ€”sort of?" I hedged, dodging through the thin space between him and the wall. "Quick run before I uh, go out andâ€”| lift some iron! You know, not going to bulk up doing nothing!"

That made the smile grow a little, before he paused. "Wait. Son, it might not be safe to run right nowâ€”there's still a lot of dragon hunting parties out there, andâ€”what in Thor's name happened to yer eye?"

I froze, most of the way to the door. "Uhâ€”| my eye?" I asked, only just now remembering the whack I'd gotten from Toothless's tailfin during our little freefall the day before.

With everything else that had happened yesterday, I hadn't yet had time to look. Glancing at one of the polished, ostensibly-for-decoration-but-totally-useable-in-a-pinch shields on the wall made me regret not looking earlier. That would've given me time to come up with a good enough lie.

The slope of my nose just next to my right eye was shaded deep, deep purple, flowing into a light blue on the opposite side of the eye. Underneath, right on the cheekbone, there was a long, red slice, several times bigger than the little scrapes on my eyebrow and chin.

"Uhâ€”| it happened in the Ring!" Dad blinked at me and I chuckled nervously. "Yeah, uhâ€”Nadder got me by surprise, you know! Just before I beat it back! It-it sure learned not to mess with me!"

Dad burst into laughter. "Tha's my boy!" he gushed. "Alrigh', go outâ€”jus' be careful, alrigh'?"

"Sure thing, Dad!" I replied, getting out of there as soon as I could.

For once, I didn't start the day with the usual pang of guilt at taking so much food—the basket of fish Toothless had caught yesterday was still in place, and, to my surprise, there was a long row of drying eel hanging from the rafters.

Well, at least there was something I definitely wasn't going to take—those things were pretty much marked human consumption only.

Snatching a basket, I made my way into the woods, using the time the walk took to prod gently at my eye and cheek.

It stung and I hissed, a half-Dragonese wordless sound. I'd need to get a plaster on that, when I got back to the house.

"Gotta work on emergency drops, I guess," I muttered, and the idea hit something in my mind like a bell. Drops, leaving the saddle—could we do it, on purpose?

I shook my head as I verged off the main path through the forest, a voice that sounded a lot like my Dad's ringing in my ears. That's ridiculous. Who would want to fall like that, from that kind of height?

My eyes dragged up to the clouds. Still—

* * *

><p>The morning with Toothless was spent doing short flights—not too high, at risk of being seen by those hunting parties—and testing out that new mind-link of ours. It took a few hours, but eventually, we were able to hold entire conversations silently, as long as skin was touching scale. My shirt or skin on the saddle didn't cut it, either, though that was enough for that weird warmth to cross through us, letting us fly.<p>

I brought my breastplate along and let Toothless sniff at it, since I was probably going to be wearing it more often. Predictably, he liked it—primarily because it gave me ******at least some protection to that ridiculously soft Squish head of yours******, but also because it smelled like something he called burning air; the scent that lightning left after striking, apparently. I liked to think that was my mother's own scent.

(He also liked the horns, but he complained long and loud was that it wasn't a nice shade of black.)

The last hour before noon, I spent with a small jar of black pitch war-paint. I never used it myself, not for my face, but it was good for projects like this. No way was I making the whole thing black—catering to his every whim wouldn't keep that ego down—but—

My first instinct had been to paint Thor's hammer. As a symbol of my lineage, I had the T-shaped symbol and a lightning bolt as a birthmark, just under my hairline, but the thing in my chest stopped me.

Not yet.

Knowing better than to argue, I instead went for the Berk crest, a Nightmare's head spiraling down into a tail, same as on the Manual, painted with careful precision on the helm. It should've been red, if I wanted it to be really accurate, but black did look better.

(_Not_ something I would be telling Toothless. His jealousy at seeing a Nightmare on my head instead of a Night Fury was bad enough, if hilarious, to deal with; his smugness at being proven "right" about the color would be unbearable.)

Once it was done, I held it up, the paint gleaming in the sun as it dried. _This_ would be what I'd wear to the Ring today.

* * *

><p>Fishlegs, the twins, and Snotlout were out of the running for the top trainee on Berk, so Gobber had told them to settle down with the spectators and watch as Astrid and I went head-to-head with the Gronkle for the position.<p>

I would have been _more_ than happy to let Astrid take the trophy today. That had been my plan all morningâ€| until the very moment I heard that my father was watching.

And had brought most of the village along, to help raise morale among the survivors of the last raid.

There was no way I'd be able to lose in front of them.

Of course, Astrid wasn't going to make things easy for me. Shortly after the Gronkle got released, I ducked behind a wall for cover and she appeared next to me, glaring fiercely.

She grabbed my shield and shoved it down, putting her face right in mine. "Stay outta my way!" she snarled. "I'm winning this thing."

"No, please," I said, sincere, "by all means." With that, plus a look of pure disgust, she ducked out from the cover of the wall. I'd once said that anyone who fell at Astrid's hand was guaranteed a spot in Valhallaâ€"maybe, if she really _did_ beat me today in the Ring, it wouldn't be that big of a let down to the audience. They'd understandâ€| right?

I stood from the wall and looked back. Dad was watching from above the rampâ€"I saw when his eyes caught on the symbol on the side of my helmet, because he smiled wider than I'd ever seen.

Growls and a quick, nearly buzzing flap of wings made me turn around. The Gronkle was close, a few feet in the air and zeroing in on me. Her eyes were narrow and there was a snarl playing on her lipsâ€"I had a feeling, now that the usual dragon kennel men were back from the raid, that her cage had been rattled before it was opened.

There was no time to even think about the consequencesâ€"with the angry dragon bearing down on me, I acted on instinct.

****C**alm down**!***** I hissed. Not impressed or affected, as usual, the Gronkle zoomed towards me"so when she was close enough, I gave her a quick scratch under the chin, where none of the spectators could see, and she dropped like a pile of the rocks she was so fond of swallowing.

Cheers started breaking out from above, but the sound of a familiar war-cry made me flinch and drop my shield and axe.

Astrid was bearing down on me, Reginlief raised high over her head. Her face was furious and battle-ready, heading my way, and honestly? The _dragon_ was less terrifying.

I yelped and ducked, my helmet sliding off my head. She suddenly stopped, and when I looked up, Astrid was standing in one place, her gaze wide and almost" lost.

Chuckling nervously, I spread my arms, gesturing to the snoozing dragon. "Tada?" I said, smiling carefully.

"_No!_" Astrid slammed Reginleif's head onto the ground, the metal making a sharp _clang_. "_No_! You fu(king son of a half-troll, rat-eating (o(k-sucking mud-_bucket_!"

(The curses made me wince; never say that all Viking women were soft. Most, when riled, could make grown men blush and go running for their equally-vulgar mothers.)

Eager to get out of her line of fire, I started towards the exit ramp. "Sooo, later"oof!"

Gobber grabbed my coat by his hook, lifting me neatly off the ground"still_ very humiliating"and plopped me back behind him. "No, I'm late, I've gotta go"

Anywhere but here, really, because the thing in my chest was giving me a good idea about how this was about to go"and I didn't like it.

"_What_?" I jumped back as Reginlief was shoved against my throat, the point of one of the blades digging into my cheek. "Late, for _what_, _exactly_?" she spat, looking only slightly insane.

(I was definitely more slightly insane for thinking" well, it was a good look for her!)

"Okay, quiet down!"

My dad's voice made everyone slow their cheers and talk, and Astrid and I both looked up. "The Elder has decided!"

Gobber moved between us and Astrid removed Reginlief, looking up to my grandmother with that fierce grace I'd always admired. I massaged my neck as Gobber held his hook over Astrid's blonde head.

Grandmother" shook her head.

Horror settled in my bones as the crowd _oooh_ed and something akin to _betrayal_ broke out over Astrid's face. _Oh gods, please no_"no,

Grandma, don't_â€

Gobber pointed to my head. I winced as she nodded and pointed to me.

Cheers burst over the entire Ring, and the horror sank deeperâ€"deeper than my bones, and digging. "Oooh, ye've done i'!" the man who was effectively my second father shouted, sounding excited and proud. "You've done i', Hicca! You get to slay th' dragon!"

I glanced over at Astridâ€"there was anger, and loathing in her glareâ€"and behind it, like I'd seen behind Ruffnut's wall to glimpse the concern for her twin, I could see something broken.

For some reason, guilt joined horror in my center. Gobber was bouncing around me like an excited puppyâ€"like Toothless, when he saw me with a basket of fishâ€"and the entire village, who yesterday had been so sad and defeated, was cheering like I'd been brought down by OÃ°in himself.

(They weren't too far wrong on that oneâ€| just a few generations back, is all.)

"Great," I said, hoping for once that I wasn't as sarcastic as I felt as Fishlegs stormed the Ring with the others and lifted me onto his shoulders.

"Tha's my boy!" Dad called, lifting a triumphant fist.

"I can't wait," I said, seeing my human cousin and the twins run around cheering. "I am soooâ€"

* * *

><p>"â€"Leaving!"<p>

Escaping the celebrations and packing everything vital into one big basket had taken me less time than I'd thoughtâ€"maybe most of an hour, to be honest. Just barely long enough for SÃ³l to make one valiant break through the clouds before starting her descent into the hungry western sea.

"We're leaving," I announced to the cove, feeling guilt and regret already eating at my stomach. "Looks like you and me are taking a little vacation, budâ€| forever."

I didn't want to leaveâ€"as wonderful and absolutely charming as it is, Berk is my home, the only one I've ever known. But with Toothless waiting in the cove, how could I possibly kill that Nightmare tomorrow? How could I try and murder a dragon, when I was Cousin to one myself?

Family was central to Vikingsâ€"and I was being forced to choose between my human one and my dragon one. It was an impossible choice, and it tore at my heartstrings. The only tipping factor was that Toothless wasn't the one forcing me into this decision; he'd never forced me into anything I didn't want to do, never expected me to be more than I was.

Toothless was my choice.

And I'd never see my father again.

I gritted my teeth. My mind was made up, I'd thought through everything and come to a rational conclusion. There was no point in thinking about it anymore. Toothless hadn't come out yet, even though I was already mostly into the cove, but he was probably still napping, the lazy dragon.

(I wasn't sure if I was stalling, or if I really did want him to have as much sleep as possible before such a long flight.)

I dumped the basket by a pile of mossy boulders next to the shore, glancing through it. A few spare sets of clothes, tools and supplies, some books, and enough provisions to last a few weeks. Enough to get me to a new place and maybe, if I didn't find a settlement that would allow dragons (a very probable scenario), allow me to build a home.

The latch and line on my right side snagged on the basket's straps. "Great," I muttered, pulling on it to release the thing and standing.

Shhhhhk

The sound made me look upâ€"Astrid!

"Yaah!" I leapt away, shocked and surprisedâ€"and wary of that axe. "As-Astrid! Um uh, uhâ€"what, what're you doing here?" I asked. "How did youâ€" _find_â€" "

"It wasn't that hard," she said, looking at Reginlief's edge. It was razor sharp, and I remembered putting it to the whetstone myself six weeks ago with a swallow. "Your tracks are pretty clear, walking to and from here everyday."

Terror froze me in place for a moment before I realized she _couldn't_ be talking about the distinctive speed-tracks. I always covered _those_ upâ€" but maybe I'd been beating a normal path through the woods without even realizing it, coming here so often.

That was a small comfortâ€"heart-stopping terror went back to the original panic, because _Astrid_ was still _in the cove!_

"You saved my little brother's life, ten years ago."

Out of everything I was expecting her to say, that wasn't on the list. I looked up at her, confused, and she scowled down at me from the rock, the sun behind her almost making her blonde hair white.

"You took him from the edge of the weapons stall, where my parents had given him to Gobber to watch, where he would've _died_, and you protected him from the Nadder fire that burned down the forge. And as far as I know, that was your last act of competency in your entire life.

"So tell me, _Hiccup_. How in Niflheim does someone who blew up half

the village the week before, suddenly become the best Viking trainee on the island?"

I stumbled back as she leapt to the ground, advancing and twirling her axe in hand.

"I trained my whole life for this afternoon. Practiced, nonstop, dawn to dusk, every day, rain or shine, no exceptions, for years. I even humbled myself to you, asking for advice, just so I'd be able to do the absolute best of anyone in that Ring.

"And then you—you pop out of nowhere, like a dragon at a birthday party! After pretty much a lifetime of incompetence, you just show up and win the whole prize! I want to know how."

Her eyes narrowed sharply and I scrambled back, eyes on the double blades. "No one just gets as good as you—especially you. Start talking!"

"Uh—uh—uh—" "Oh Thor, please let Toothless be smart enough to stay hidden!"

"Are you training with someone?" Astrid pressed, looking at me, her eyes demanding and fed up.

"Wha—training?"

"It'd better not involve this!" she said, nearly lifting me up completely by grabbing at the shoulder of my harness.

"I-I know, this looks really bad—" The leather I'd used to make it was some of the best on Berk—scraps, all of it, but there was no way she would miss the quality. The village had been hoarding leather to use for covers and blankets for winter storms, and me taking as much as I had?

(Still not nearly as damaging as feeding entire baskets of fish to a dragon, though.)

"Well, you see, this is uh—"

A rustle in the shadowed bushes—Toothless's favorite napping spot—made Astrid gasp. I froze, praying to every god watching, and she took advantage of my pause to toss me onto the ground.

Even though she walked over my chest to look towards the bushes, I noticed something change in her face. Instead of anger and annoyance, there was fearlessness and determination—she held her axe beside her and stood—protectively? Between me and the shadowy corner, shoulders back and eyes narrowed.

The change was strange, but I didn't have much time to think it over—I couldn't let her get to Toothless. Ignoring the bruise probably already forming on my chest, I clambered to my feet, reaching after her.

"No! No, you're right—you're right!" She didn't stop walking towards the bushes, so I ran after her, trying to get her attention back on me—even if it was her anger, it was better to point it towards me, always better on me, than the downed dragon hiding just

there. "I'm through with the lies! I've beenâ€"I've been makingâ€"outfits!"

Not my best line, but since it came out, it would have to do. I dodged in front of her path, grabbing her hand and putting it on my chest in an effort to get her mind _off_ the bushes. "Sooo, you got me! It's time everyone knew. Drag me back, go ahead, here we go, back to the villâ€"_ow!_"

My wrist crackled painfully as she bent it back, sending me to my knees on the cove floor. "Why would you _do_ that?" I yelped, hugging the throbbing appendage to my chest.

She pointed her axe at my face. "You don't get to touch me." A booted foot slammed into my chest, kicking me flat. "_That's_ for the lies! And _that's_â€""

Astrid let Reginleif drop, the handle hitting heavy on myâ€"soft bits.

"_OOF!_" I doubled over, pain flaring like a fire in a spot fire had never before touchedâ€"thank every god in every realm.

"â€"for everything else!" she finished, hissing dangerously. I looked up at her, my eyes wide and confusedâ€"what did she mean by _everything else_?â€"and I noticed the thin shine of that same betrayal from earlier in her eyes.

H**iccup**?

What Astrid only heardâ€"what I understood and completely dreadedâ€"was little more than a curious and half-sleepy growl.

"Oh gods," I groaned, rolling onto my side. Toothless was coming out of the bushes, his green eyes growing wide at the sight of a new squish in his cove.

Astrid gasped. "Get down!" she shrieked, spinning and tackling me to the floor. Reginleif landed on my faceâ€"thankfully with the flat end, but painfully right on top of my black eye.

"_OW!_" I yelped, and that was the wrong thing to do.

C**ousin**!

Toothless screeched, bolting forward, teeth bared and wings huge. Astrid rolled to her feet, plucking Reginleif from my face and holding it up to swing, screaming "Runâ€"_run!_"

Horror curled in my gut and I leapt around and at the girl, grabbing the shaft and ripping it out of her grip. Nearly tripping over my feet, I tossed it away, far out of reach of her grasping hands. She was on the ground, vulnerable, and I spun around and got to my feet to hold my hands out to Toothless.

"No! No, it's okay!" Not entirely sure who I was trying to convince, Toothless or Astrid, I glanced between them both. Astrid was down on the grass, but her eyes were wide and terrified; Toothless was reared onto two legs, his flapping wings making him seem four times larger

than he really was, but just my hands held him at bay.

***S**he _hurt_ you**!"** Toothless snarled, screeching like an angry mother hawk.

"She's a friend!" I told him, holding both my hands to him.

He lowered himself back to all fours, but kept growling. ***W**hat kind of twisted _friend_ would slam a weapon into your _face_**?"** he snapped, pressing to my side.

Not wanting to reveal _another_ secret, I put my hands on his headâ€”hoping the touch would either calm him or hold him back if it didn't. I sent Astrid a nervous smile. "Youâ€”you just scared him!"

Astrid wobbled to her feet, obviously shocked. "I scared _him_?" she repeated, incredulous.

Actually, Toothless seemed to agree. ***S**he didn't _scare_ me, the dam#ed squish hurt _you_**!"**

Then, Astrid froze. "_Who_ is _him_?"

I gave her a shaky smile, hoping that maybe this could turn out better than I thought it would. "Uh, Astrid?" I asked, letting go of Toothless to show her both my hands (much like I'd just done with another, similarly extremely dangerous and unpredictable creature about five seconds ago). "This is Toothless," I said, gesturing to him. "Toothless," I said, glancing back at him and mentally _praying_ he'd behave. "Astrid."

Toothless, for his part, bared his teeth and snarled.

Ooof course.

Astrid stared at Toothless for a moment, before looking at me with that same betrayalâ€”that quickly turned into righteous fury as she turned and ran out of the cove.

"Da da da, we're dead." Toothless snorted and turned, walking back towards the bushes. ***W**hoa whoa whoa, where do you think _you're_ going**?"**

***B**ack to flaming sleep**."**

***B**ack toâ€”Toothless! Astrid just _found out_ about you! She's going to tell the whole village that you're here**!"** I yelped.

***A**nd hopefully, they'll decide she's crazy like she obviously is and ship her off the edge of the Realm. Isn't that what squishes do to mad nest-mates**?"**

(Actually, not our tribe, not reallyâ€”we tended to just build their houses farther away from the main village than anyone else's in the hopes that they'd either stay up there or freeze away. Case in point: Mildew.)

***S**he's not crazy, and they'll believe her**!"** I snapped.

"We have to go and get her before she tells anyone**!"**

Toothless looked up and growled. **"W**hy are you using the word _we_ here? I'm not having that insane squish on my back. I barely let _you_ on my back**."**

I sent him a _look_. **"T**oothless, this is _your_ doing. If you hadn't _attacked_ her, she wouldn't've even known you were here**!"**

"No, if she hadn't _hurt you_, I wouldn't've attacked**!"**
Toothless snarled back, protective as ever. **"W**hy do you care so much anyway, it's only _one_ female squishâ€"oh**."**

I didn't like dawning comprehension, nor the look of the sly grin on his face. **"Y**ou want to _mate_ with her**!"**

Heat filled up every inch of my face. **"I** do not**!"** I yowled.

"You do**!"** Toothless realized, way too gleefully, in my opinion. Then, he scowled. **"S**quish, we need to work on your taste in females. That one's obviously had too many half-gone fish**."**

"I do notâ€"she hasn'tâ€"urgh!" I pulled at my hair and glared at him. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response! But Astrid is on her way to Berk right now, and when she gets there, we'll have 300-odd pissed off Vikings all after our headsâ€"my _entire_ tribe! Out to kill us _both_! If we don't stop her, nothing will stop _them_, do you understand me, you stupid arrogant Dragon?!"

Toothless glared right back at me, but something must've broken through that thick skull of his, because he grumbled but lowered his chest to the ground. Sighing in relief, I sprinted over and leapt into the saddle, my foot moving instinctively to match Toothless's other fin.

We took off, going high to try and find her among the trees. By easing one of my hands onto the scales behind Toothless's ears, the thing behind my chest opened and connected usâ€"I used his better vision to pick out movement and blonde hair.

There! I thought, mentally pointing her out.

Yeah yeah, I see the squish.

He still didn't sound happy, but dove, catching her just as she leapt off a log. I winced as she started screaming at the top of her lungs, and broke our connection by taking my hand from his scales. Human ears weren't very sensitiveâ€"something very good, in this case.

"_Oh_ great OÃ°in's ghost! Oh this is it!
_Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa_â€"!"

"Why are squishes so _loud_**?"** Toothless mumbled, unable to escape his own heightened sense of hearing, his wings beating heavily

to swing us back around. He dropped her unceremoniously onto one of the highest branches of the ancient pines surrounding the cove before landing smoothly on the very tip, bending it dangerously horizontal.

I ignored him and looked down. Astrid was hanging onto the branch with both hands.

"Hiccup!" she shrieked, not less than a hundred feet off the ground. "Get me _down_ from here!"

"L**et her drop**,"** Toothless urged. I thumped him on the neck. ***"W**hat? You nearly cried the last time I stepped on you thereâ€"you are fully entitled to drop her**!"

Also ignoring _that_, I turned to face Astrid. "Please," I begged, "you have to give me a chance to explain."

"I am not listening to _anything_ you have to say!" she screamed, already working her way towards the trunk.

"Then I won't speak!" I promised, holding out my hands. "Justâ€"let me show you." She looked down. "Please, Astrid. We'll get you down, either way butâ€"

"T**here goes that _we_ again**."

I licked my lips. "F-for Erik."

That made her pause. The night I'd saved Erik, Lars Hofferson had asked me what I wanted in returnâ€"I hadn't said anything, and I knew Astrid had overheard my father warning me not to ask them for anything trivial; it would've been a stain on their honor, like I was saying Erik's life was equal to a piggyback ride, or a new seaxe, to me. My bringing Erik up told her that this was a grave concern to meâ€"and it really, really was.

"Justâ€"just come with me, and we'll be square for it. I swear." It seemed like a fair trade to me. She owed me her brother's life, and now mine in all but blood was in her hands.

Astrid hesitated for a moment, before pulling herself up with a grunt. I offered a hand to help her on, but she slapped it away.

Toothless growled. ***"U**ngrateful _eel_**."***

I thumped him again, and he slapped me with an ear. Astrid watched the interaction with incredulous eyes as she settled behind me.

(I tried not to think about the heat at my back butâ€"| I'm a teenaged boy, she's a beautiful girl, give me a break!)

"Now get me down!"

I nodded and turned forward. "Toothless," I said, "down. _Gently._"

Obedient for once, he spread his wings wide to either side. Wind caught under them both, billowing them up, and I turned to give

Astrid a smile. "See?" I asked. She looked to either side, still suspicious but calming, slowly. "Nothing to be afraid of!"

***"O**h, sure. I'll be as _gentle_ with her as she was with you**."**

I had time for the words to register and a quick mutter of "Oh, \$hit." before he shot into a vertical takeoff.

The sudden wind ripped at my face but didn't succeed in drowning out Astrid's shrieks of terror.

Toothless went high, flapping almost desperately for altitude. "Toothless! What're you doing?" I yelled, one fist around the handhold behind his ears. Feeling her start slipping, I twisted and reached back, grabbing one of her spiked shoulder-guards to keep her from falling to her doom. "Bad dragon, very bad dragon!"

We leveled out, high over the ocean. I glanced back at Astrid, who'd wrapped her arms around my chest for a better hold. She looked terrified. "He's uh, he's not usually like this," I tried to explain.

***"T**his'll teach her to hit my aerie**â€¦!"**

I felt my foot shift, without me telling it to, and the black sails at our sides drew close. "Oh no."

"Whaâ€¦" _aaaaaaaaaaaa!_"

Toothless dropped, easing over backwards into a dive. He hit the water and then angled up, coming out with a quick splash and two spluttering Vikings on his back. I could feel him grinning as he dove again, dragging us through the spray before lifting up again.

"Toothless, what are you doing, we need her to _like_ us, remember?" I demanded.

***"W**e only need one thing from her and it isn't her worthless _opinion_**,"** Toothless snarled. My foot shifted, and I felt our weight slide to the side.

"And now, the _spinning_." Astrid screamed, holding onto my back for dear life. I glared down at the saddle. "Thank you for _nothing_, you useless reptile."

In reply, Toothless turned into a dive, and spun through _that._

"Okay!" Astrid shrieked. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Just get me off of this thing!"

***_**T**here_ it is**."**

Toothless's wings snapped out wide and my foot tilted to expand the fin all the way. The sudden stop made Astrid yelp, but we weren't aiming for the sea any longer.

He angled higher, flapping gently west, into the golden sunset. I

gaped down at him, moving a hand to grab his ear.

**That's**** what you wanted? An **_**apology**_**? Are you kidding me, you nearly gave her a heart attack!**

Toothless snorted. **Don't exaggerate. Even **_**I**_** know squishes can handle a little fun.** I was about to answer that, but he looked back and smiled toothlessly at me. **Now, why don't we show her what flying can **_**really**_** be like?**

Unable to stay angry at that face, I sighed and shook my head. **If you'd done that in the **_**first place**_**â€|**

He grinned. **She needed to be brought down a notch. Stupid squish thought she could raise her axe to a **_**Night Fury**_**.**

Oh, so it wasn't about her hitting me anymore, was it? I rolled my eyes, but the death-grip and the head squeezing onto my shoulder made me look back. I glanced at the sunset, then at the painted clouds above. **High?**

High.

Breaking the connection and grabbing the leather handhold, I clicked my foot into position and we rose on a thermal, easing up towards the pink and gold clouds. The wind was gentler and cooler up here, tasting softer than the harsh salt of the sea below.

It wasn't until we were past the lower layer that Astrid let go of me enough to look around. In every direction around us, the clouds rose in that way only clouds could, immense spires and mountains, puffing out and swirling in breezes that would never touch the surface of the world or any of its other inhabitants below.

Toothless pulled us close to one and Astrid glanced at meâ€"I smiledâ€"before she raised a hand to try and touch it. "It's water!" she realized, looking down at me with wide eyes as the liquid dribbled down her arm.

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "Wowâ€"Frigg must spin them as, as huge rolls of _fog_, way up here."

"Who would've thought?" She stretched both her arms high, plunging them both into the peach-tinted mist and laughing as streams of water tickled her arms on the way down. "I'm _touching_ the _clouds_!" she said, ribbons and spirals of the fluff eddying out from where her arms were touching.

Her laughter and my own amazement at being so close to something usually accessible only to the gods nearly made me miss it, but then again, there really was no missing the wonder in her voice. I smiled and glanced down at Toothless, and we banked underneath and back up and around the other side of the fluffy construct.

"_Wow_." Astrid and I were in unison at the sight of the immense pinnacles suddenly rising before us, every last one a sea stack of the sky. They were bigger than mountains, textured with the colors of the setting sun, and _breathhtaking_.

Toothless angled himself again, doing a loop a lot smoother and

gentler than the ones before, and we broke through another layer, going higher than I'd thought possible.

Up here it was nearly freezing, but the sun had set and the stars were burning in the night, unreachable even to a Night Fury. The clouds below were thick but stood out sharply, pale blue and white against the black.

I inhaled sharply as lights suddenly erupted above us, bands of green, blue, and purple that danced in the sky. I'd once compared the movements of the wind to a celestial dancer's ribbons—now, I knew that only these would be used by the gods, immense and stunning.

"Oh _Heimdall_, " Astrid murmured, amazed.

And then Toothless led us past the edge of the cloud layer—Berk was below. We both gasped at the sight, cooking hearths and the Great Fires of the Great Hall twinkling like stars set below us. The spires of the mountains and sea stacks stood out in the moonlight, silver bouncing off the waves far below.

Toothless grinned back up to us and I chuckled, patting him on the head. **That's more like it, buddy**

The feeling of arms wrapping softly around my middle made me freeze, and a soft chin on my shoulder made me relax. My heart fluttered a little and I couldn't stop my grin—Astrid was hugging me.

Toothless heaved out a sigh underneath us. **You're hopeless, you ridiculous Squish.**

Shut up, you arrogant Dragon, I said back, almost just out of habit, too happy to care.

We went low to the sea, passing by the wide circle of bastions, each one with a glowing fire in their mouths that roared higher when we—er, I—passed. Toothless purred in contentment as we rose again, the wind warm against his wings as we went high over the island and cut west across it, back over the sea.

Astrid let go and cleared her throat before saying, "Alright. I admit it. This is pretty cool."

"Right?" I asked, grinning brightly as relief poured into my veins.

"It's _amazing_, " she agreed, looking through the sky. She smirked down at Toothless. "And I never thought dragons could have attitudes."

Toothless and I snorted together. "Oh, he has _plenty_ of that—ow!" His ear settled back down against his head. "Toothless!"

He made an innocent, not-apologetic-at-all croon, and Astrid laughed behind me. I took my hands off his scales and crossed my arms. "Oh, so you're gonna be like that, are you? Fine—forget cod, you're getting smoked eel for breakfast tomorrow, buddy."

Toothless's head snapped up, then angled back with a devastated,

mourning yowl there didn't need to be words in for me to understand. I chuckled, knowing he knew I was kidding.

"Tomorrowâ€|" I glanced back at Astrid, who looked worried. "Hiccup, your final exam is tomorrow." I closed my eyes, really not wanting to think about that. Too caught up in my own conflict, I didn't notice as Toothless suddenly tensed underneath me, gurgling quietly. "How are you supposed toâ€"you have a dragon, how are you going to kill one?" she asked, hissing the last part, as if Toothless wouldn't hear.

Groaning, I let my head fall to Toothless's neck. "Please don't remindâ€" "

The second my forehead hit scales, fire erupted and any and all thoughts scattered and vanished like mist in sunlight.

* * *

><p>*Concept of Hiccup getting hit in the royal jewels and being obliged to drop her, borrowed from The Black Covenant, by the wonderful KingofthePhantomDragon.**

**Hello from Dublin Airport!
>

Aaaand goodbye as I make my way to Heathrow! Then Chicago! Then Memphis! Then home!

(That's sixteen hours... oh well. I'll catch up on my sleep, at least.)

Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

~Tibki

16. Chapter 16

Hey y'all!

Back in the States! Slept for twelve hours in my own bed, which smelled of cat pee and home.

**Today's chapter is a switch in POV, hope I did it justice. Especially since I always thought Astrid's sudden love of Hiccup was a little strange in the movie, something I've been trying to remedy using extra scenes and little sentences from Hiccup's POV about her actions towards him. **

Anyway, hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SIXTEEN</p>

Astrid literally could not remember the last time she'd felt thisâ€¦ light. Carefree. Wonderful.

Who would've thought that it would be because of the scrawny little Chief's son? Yes, she'd known, more than anyone else it seemed at times, that there was more to Hiccup than you saw at first glanceâ€”he'd thought and acted quickly enough to save her little brother, after all. And through the years, though he kept succeeding in bringing almost every building in range down as ashes, glimpses of that quick mind and stubborn core kept cropping up.

Sometimes she wondered if she was the only one who thought about how much work he had to put into each of his contraptions, how boar-headed he had to be to keep trying despite every failure. True, most of her thoughts involved something along the lines of _if he spent those months working out rather than on those _things_, he'd bring down less of the village every week_, but she still had a feeling it was more than any other Berkian figuredâ€”she, at least, had some concept of the length of time. They probably thought he slapped it together in a matter of hours, after spending maybe twenty minutes wondering how he could ruin their lives that day.

Well, maybe that wasn't fair. The village _did_ care about Hiccup, in their own way; the fact that they hadn't shipped him off said as much. But there was no question that they'd rather he turn the sword away from the whetstone and towards some dragons. It was agreed across the entire village: Hiccup should focus on _killing_, forget the _inventing_.

But while they were still in the air, when she'd been looking down at Berk, she'd heard a click and turned her head just slightly, to see some kind of weird platform Hiccup's foot was resting on. He'd just turned his ankle to flatten it out, and it was connected to a long braided rope sleeved in leather that ran down the dragon's side.

She'd glanced back and had been shocked to see one black, natural tailfinâ€”and the so-called sail he'd said was a prototype for a stealth ship. _Hiccup, you little Loki!_ she'd thought, grinning despite herself.

It didn't take too long for her to remember what Gobber had saidâ€”that a downed dragon was a dead dragon. Hiccup, instead of killing thisâ€¦ whatever species it was, had used his _inventing_ to give it its flight back, and in return, it let him experience somethingâ€¦ _wonderful_.

Only _Hiccup_ would do something like that. Only _Hiccup_ was smart enough to figure out flight and build that fin. Probably only the Chief's son could be stubborn and patient enough in front of what had to have been an angry, injured _dragon_. _Definitely_ only Hiccup was crazy enough to actually _help_ this thing instead of just kill it.

She remembered the scrawny fishbone with theâ€”sometimes, admittedly witty (though she would _never_ say it out loud)â€”sarcasm and the constantly dejected expression.

(Whenever he saw her, and she nodded, his eyes would light up, just a little bit. Astrid liked feeling in control of her environment; she

liked being able to put that spark in his eyes whenever she wanted.)

(She'd seen that light more often, and stronger, latelyâ€”a determined candle when she'd interrupted him in the forge with his "sail", and a blazing hearth of wonder when they'd been flying through those otherworldly lights. She never saw it in the Ring.)

Vikings were pretty straight forward, but Hiccup? It was weird, and curious, and wondrous, the surprise of something lying hidden just beneath the skinny and sarcastic surface. That something as crazy and amazing as this, as flight and the obviously close friendship he had with this black beast, could be waiting there like a chest of treasure on Berk that no one had even known existed.

And she, she realized with a thrill of happy pride, was the first one to see the gleaming gold inside.

Suddenly, she didn't even care that he'd snatched the prize she'd worked her entire life for from her fingertips. The sight of Berk from hundreds of feet above the ocean dashed those old dreams of dragon-killing glory against the rocksâ€”inconsequential. There were whole other worlds up here, with the dragon, and inside the boy in front of her.

A new dream grewâ€”a strange curiosity wrapped around her heart like lambwool, mixing with the wonder of all the things she'd learned and seen just in a half hour. Astrid was curiousâ€”if there was something this great just under a thin layer, what were the chances that there was something even greater, deeper? She found herself wanting to knowâ€”well, more, about the dragons, and about talking fishbone of Berkâ€”something that surprised but didn't really upset her, not anymore.

After all, Hiccup was just one more wonder among the rest she'd just experienced.

And then all of that, the carefreeness and the light, gentle curiosity, crashed into the sea when he mentioned tomorrow.

"Hiccup," Astrid said with dawning horror. "Your final exam is tomorrow." She felt him tense and flinch in front of her, and saw his hands turn white on the leather grips behind the dragon's ears. His dragon, the one he'd just played around with like a pet puppy. "How are you supposed toâ€”You have a dragon!"

Memories of the Ring flitted through her mind; never once had Hiccup injured any of the caged beasts, just sent them away or to sleep. He really couldn't hurt anything, could he? "How are you supposed toâ€”" Mindful of the beast underneath, she lowered her voice, "kill one?"

Hiccup groaned. "Please don't remindâ€”"

He fell forward in a characteristic sign of gloom, but when his head hit the dragon's neck, he froze.

Astrid frowned, growing concerned as the sentence was left

unfinished. "Hiccup?" she asked, leaning forward. "Are you okay?"

She put a hand on his back, and pulled back quickly. He was hot—as in burning, radiating a heat along the lines of the metal-melting fires she'd felt during her few visits inside the forge. On top of that, even through the layers of shirt and the ropes of catgut that tied the two halves of his strange leather tunic together, she could feel muscles—lean but unexpectedly strong, and rippling.

It took a moment for her ears to pick up the sound, almost too low for her to hear at all, but when she did—

"Hiccup, are you—growling?" she asked, leaning forward more to try and get a look at his face.

In a quick movement that was more like an in-dam^ed blur, Hiccup's thin hands shot forward, grabbing the small black flaps of skin between the dragon's ears. His head bolted up, and Astrid just had enough time to see the terrifying change in Hiccup's green eyes before their ride plummeted.

She screamed—unsure whether it was because what in Niflheim is happening or holy \$HIT we're going to fall and die—and hugged his too-warm back, her stomach getting left behind where they'd been gliding so peacefully seconds before, and her heart somewhere in her throat.

With her chest up against his back, she could more easily feel the vibrations he was making—growls, and purrs, and croons and every manner of noise that she'd heard from dragon jaws and had never expected to hear from a human.

Astrid looked up, completely freaked out and freaking out more with every passing second. They weren't in the clear, cloud-spotted night skies over Berk anymore—now there was fog everywhere, and she couldn't even see the black edges of the dragon's wings, it was so thick. It also, to her horror, smelled like brimstone—a scent the surviving Vikings were swearing up and down they still could pick up, even so far from the source.

"Oh gods—oh in, this is Helheim's Gate!" she hissed. "Hiccup! Hiccup, turn us around!"

Astrid reached up to shake his shoulder hoping to break him out of this trance, only to get the shock of her life.

The same noise—a yowling half-roar—came from both boy and dragon, and their shoulders moved together, even though only Hiccup's shook her hand off.

She yanked her hand back, eyes wide and heart thumping, her gaze glued to the impossibility in front of her. The dragon's large, narrow ears twitched, left and right—and Hiccup's head tilted with them, just ever so slightly, like he was trying to hear something better.

In an eerie and freakish unison, the dragon's wings flapped hard and Hiccup rose out of the saddle, both beast and boy suddenly

leaning away from the right" just as a sinewy Nightmare became visible through the fog.

Astrid clamped a hand over her mouth before she could cry out in fear, and flattened herself onto Hiccup's back. Maybe"hopefully"it hadn't seen her, because a Monstrous Nightmare would crush Hiccup's small dragon in seconds, enormous wingspan or no.

They tilted to the side again, Hiccup and the dragon moving together once more as if they were just"one thing"and Astrid nearly screamed again as a Nadder appeared to their left. This time, she heard the click and shift of the tailfin"Astrid glanced down and saw Hiccup's foot still moving, which assured her for one moment before she looked back and saw that even the tailfins were matching their movements exactly.

It wasn't human conscious thought guiding his foot anymore, it was something more, something else, and Astrid suddenly felt terrifyingly alone amongst dragons.

That only got worse as more and more started to appear through the fog, like spirits through the veil of death"Gronkles, Zipplebacks, Nightmares, Nadders, some she didn't even recognize and none like Hiccup's dragon, and it was seconds before there were hundreds.

"W-what's going on?" she muttered, even if she knew no one would answer her. It made her feel less sane, speaking to no one, but saying the words grounded her in a way her thoughts couldn't"thoughts would've carried her off into chaos and terror like a Nightmare would sheep.

Looking around her, Astrid's entire body froze as she realized one of the Nightmares actually did have a sheep in its claws.

"Are they"are they bringing in their kill?" she whispered, horror spreading through her gut like ice on a lake, as she started to see catches in every claw around them. "Oh gods"are we"?"

Could it be that the dragon had betrayed them? That it had just been baiting them along, only to bring them back for supper? It agreed with everything she'd been taught, told, and warned about dragons"that they were wily, crafty, and treacherous. Not something to trust.

But the way the dragon had slapped Hiccup with an ear"gently, but otherwise like one would punch a shield-brother in the arm"and the way they'd argued, even if the dragon hadn't been able to say a word back"the way Hiccup hadn't screamed once during the initial disaster of a flight, how he'd been completely devoid of fear|

Suddenly, a large Zippleback to her left made itself known with a gurgling yowl, narrowed eyes piercing into them. Astrid swallowed, but Hiccup and the dragon|

EEEEEOOOOOOOOAAAAaaaaa

They both turned their heads as one and shrieked, a near

ballistic sound of warning Astrid would know in her sleep. Shocked numb, she almost missed the way she could see both pairs of eyesâ€”the dragon's so much bigger, but Hiccup's just as toxic green as the reptile's, all four pupils narrow black slitsâ€”flare in fury and protective anger.

The Zippleback screechedâ€”she could see fear enter the four yellow eyesâ€”before rearing back and away.

She didn't think there could be a shock on top of great steeds of the Valkyrie, she was riding a NIGHT FURY, but there it was, because "Hiccupâ€”did you understand that thing?"

Both dragon and boy made some kind of groaning sound, before shaking their heads together.

"Rightâ€”because you can't understand me. Even though we're both human." Astrid swallowed thickly, and was given a half-second's warning in the click of the pedal before they eased down into a dive.

She didn't even scream this timeâ€”muchâ€”though that might've had something to do with the thousands of predators surrounding herâ€”and the water was visible again. Juts of black rock popped out from the fog, suddenly as strikes from Mj  lnir and some shaped like them too, but neither Hiccup nor his dragonâ€”any of the dragonsâ€”seemed to flinch, angling themselves smoothly together to duck down and around the obstacles.

Her ears started picking up clicks, clicks from everywhereâ€”the dragons around her, from the fog ahead, from Hiccup in front and the Night Fury below. When they angled back up to where the fog was thinner, Astrid saw the source of the clicking in front of them and gaped.

It was a boiling mountain.

She'd heard storiesâ€”who hadn't?â€”of the boiling mountains that stood on the islands to the south and east. Her father had told her stories about the distant relatives she had on them, related as brothers 300 years past, who worked underneath the cousins of their own head familyâ€”Hiccup's cousins.

She'd heard stories about how they wept tears of molten rock, and created rocks that could float in water. She'd also heard about how they would sometimes explode, sending the wrath of the gods down on some sad tribe who hadn't done their rituals correctly, raining fire and ash and smoke until no one and nothing was left standing.

Those stories didn't do it justice. It stood out of the water like a massive, jagged black tooth, and the glow of the melting streams of lava cut through the mist like a red-hot sword through parchment.

Every dragonâ€”including the one she was sitting onâ€”flew into a thin crevice, halfway up the side of the mountain. She couldn't stop her scream this time as the massive air-sails on either side tucked in to avoid hitting the walls, speeding them up into the pitchy darkness.

(Some part of her that wasn't terrified, or freaked out, or about to fly to pieces, realized that she couldn't even see the Night Fury's black scales anymore, even though the brightest colors on the Nadders and Nightmares were still visible. That certainly explained why no one had ever seen one, with the raids all at nightâ€|)

They flew into a big, open chamber in the middle of the mountainâ€"the thing was hollow, with walls and spires coming out of a foggy depth that glowed bright red. It grew hot, hotter even than Hiccup's skin at this point, as they dove over the center pit. There were even more dragons all around them, huddling or sitting together on ledges.

Astrid wasn't a stupid girl. This was the Nest.

The dragons released their catches into the hole, and Astrid hugged Hiccup, tensing because this was the moment she would dieâ€"the dragon would flip over and send them falling to their boiling doomâ€"

Except all that happened, was that boy and dragon roared as one again, deep into the depths of the pit.

Turning their heads together, they found something they were looking for. A click of the tailfin and a turn of the wings, and they left the line of dragons that was flowing past the pit, going to land on a secluded, high, jutting piece of rock.

The landing was smooth, but involved a few leaps to slow them downâ€"Astrid's eyes widened as she realized that they had hidden themselves behind a pillar of rock, and her shock only grew as both heads turned to face her.

She stiffened where she sat, freaked out and slightly afraid, but the look in all four eyesâ€"searching, worriedâ€"made her involuntarily relax as she blinked in surprise. There was no threat there, and insteadâ€| concern?

Nodding at whatever they found, they turned their heads back forward, to look at the pit and the stream of dragons that were feeding it.

Hiccupâ€"and therefore the dragonâ€"released some kind of growl and a few low chirps. Even though it wasn't anything like Norse, she definitely didn't imagine the sarcasm dripping off the sounds.

(It was both a little comforting and completely typical that Hiccup was still Hiccup, even when he was maybe possibly being possessed by a Night Fury.)

All of the dragons, after releasing their catches into the hole, swooped around and onto roosts, much like the Night Fury had done. "They're not eating any of it," Astrid suddenly realized.

The flow of dragons suddenly petered out, leaving only one Gronkle to come in from the entrance. Astrid watched it go, seeing it move slowly and haltingly, dropping a few feet every couple of secondsâ€"it seemed old, barely able to fly.

She saw scars on its thick hide, and realized they were probably from

her own friends and family. Suddenly, she wasn't sure how she felt about that. It didn't even have a catch.

Instead, it stumbled, as much as anything could stumble in the air, over to the pit. Hocking a bit like a cat with a hairball in its throat, it shuddered and burped up a small fish, sliding it off its tongue and letting it fall.

"Urgh," Astrid groaned, disgusted. The sound Hiccup and the dragon made, however, didn't matchâ€"they stepped back, making something Astrid would hesitatingly describe as a draconic _wince_.

An enormous grumble came from below and Astrid froze. The Gronkle hovered in the air a moment, scratching an ear with its hind legâ€"

â€"and its whole life was snuffed out like a tiny ember.

An _enormous_ head rose out of the red mist, as smoothly as a whale but deadly as a shark. Jaws wider than two ships side-by-side opened and clamped shut around the sorry dragon, and Astrid didn't miss the way the others roosted around them drew away and back in fear. This-this was not just any dragon. This was _J rmungandr_. _It was a monster._

Hiccup and his dragon growled. Astrid stared, because the sound was _angry_.

The monster's head sunk back down most of the way, but stopped when their growls echoed in the walls of the Nest. Terror jolted through her bones like cold lightning when she realized it was looking towards _them_.

It growled, echoing like thunder in the hollow mountain, tiny white eyes narrowing. Astrid lowered herself to Hiccup's back, ignoring how the extra heat just made her start sweating worse, hoping against hope that they were hidden well enough, or that it had poor eyesight in the dark.

Except the dragon stepped forward in threat and he and Hiccup _snarled_, deadly and loud.

Ooof course.

The thing _roared_, shooting up and forward.

Astrid screamed as they took off like a bowmaster's arrow, flapping desperately to get high and away from slamming jaws and teeth as big as houses. The rest of the roosting dragons panicked and took off as well, crowding towards the exit, but none of them seemed to fly anywhere near the Night Fury, several even bumping into each other to get out of their way.

The thing started _following_ them, climbing its heavy body out of the holeâ€"teeth came frightening close, but closed around an unfortunate Zippleback instead, the heads shrieking as it was pulled down.

The next thing Astrid knew, they were out of the hole on the top of the mountain and still climbing. The Night Fury went high, higher

than any of the others, until _oh gods I can't even see the ground get me DOWN_.

The wings stopped flapping and there was a moment of weightlessness that made Astrid's stomach clench.

And then the wings came back in and they tumbled down.

Astrid _screamed_, clutching onto Hiccup's back. They were diving, which was bad enoughâ€”at a shallow angle, which was supposed to be better than a drop but wasn't, because it was making them cover a lot of ground _fast_.

Too fast.

OhgodsohOÃ°inhelppohgodsohgodssâ€”

With every passing second, they picked up more and more speed. Her shriek was torn out of her lips as the wind blasted over them, streamlined by the Night Fury's smooth shape. It tore at her hair and her ears, deafening her with its roars, then at her skinâ€”she felt her cheeks ripple, which was weird and almost _painful_.

She had to close her eyes because the cold air was drying them out and she felt it sting sharply on her entire face, and the dark made her twice as terrified as anything. It was too much too harsh too _fast_ and she was going to _die_â€”

OhgodshelpmepleasegetmeoffgetmeoffGETMEOFFâ€”

Her arms couldn't hold on any longer, even though she knew what would happen if she let go. Spiraling and nothingness and death, but the air pulling on her was too strong, she couldn'tâ€”

A too-hot hand snapped out and grabbed her neck and pulled down. Astrid's eyes struggled openâ€”the entire world was nothing more than a blue-grey blur around her and the sight tossed her guts around inside herâ€”except there was the determined face of the boy who'd put her into a more secure hold at his side.

Her heart was pounding a mile a minuteâ€”_toofastohgodsggetmeOFFâ€”_but then Hiccup glanced down at her and smiled.

Astrid froze. The Night Fury eyes glinted, but it was the same crooked smile as everâ€”the same Hiccup smile, trusting and open, the rare one he only gave sometimes, because his sarcastic one was much more common.

Despite the eyes, his smile grounded her for a moment. It was proofâ€”somewhere, underneath that Night Fury possession, was Hiccup. He'd cared enough about her to break out of its control and keep her from falling off. She could trust him.

Astrid wrapped her arms around his middle and held on tight, closing her eyes to the tearing and shrieking wind again, because otherwise she felt like they'd be ripped out. She felt Hiccup crouch low and pull her as close to his chest as she could get still sitting behind him.

(She would later swear to never, ever address it, ever, but when he cradled her scalp in his palm, pulling her head to his collarbone and resting his chin and cheek on hers, she'd never felt safer.)

And then suddenly, it was over.

The wings spread wide again, catching air and going back to a steady flight. Astrid, after the jolt and near-whiplash, quickly pulled out of Hiccup's grasp, and the boy didn't seem to mind. He eased up to let her go, then focused again ahead of them.

Heart still beating hard and fast, Astrid looked around, desperate to know they would land soon. She couldn't see any landâ€| but there were no more dragons anywhere in sight, back all the way to every horizonâ€they'd left them all far behind, in a matter of seconds.

Night Fury, Astrid numbly realized, suddenly in awe as well as fear. She remembered the impossible speed and accuracy of the attacks during the raids, and knew she'd just experienced that terror first-person. This was definitely that dragon.

But then, there was also the unbelievably gigantic dragon that had been lying in wait in the Nest. "What in Helheim was that thing?" she asked, grateful, for the first time since it began, that Hiccup wouldn't understand her, because her voice shook and cracked. It was like something out of a story, a monster that dwarves had constructed and Thor would bring downâ€except Thor was obviously not bringing it down, because only the gods knew how long it had been in there.

All the dragons were feeding itâ€| almost like bees would feed their queen. It was the Mother of the Nest, she realized, and right behind that was the fact that the dragons probably had no choice in what they were doing.

Berk was in a hard place, with winter on one side and fire-breathing predators on the otherâ€the dragons were the same, with Vikings in one direction and that thing waiting at home.

That thing had eatenâ€

Uuuuurâ€ "â€ "uuuhhhâ€| "

Astrid jumped as the over-powering heat rolling off the boy in front of her suddenly tapered off, leaving him feeling almost cold, next to what he had been. But what had started out as a distinctly dragon warble had faded into a blessedly human groan.

Astrid watched with wide eyes as Hiccup released his dragon's earflaps, his arms trembling as he tried to push himself up. Once he was more or less verticalâ€swaying dangerously, but the dragon tilted them all to keep him steady somehowâ€his left hand came up to rub his face.

"Ooohâ€| wh-what hapâ€_" Astrid's stomach squirmed as his words devolved into grumbles and whimpers. So it hadn't ended yet. The dragon underneath snorted and crooned, but Hiccup only whined before collapsing backwards.

Astrid yelled as she suddenly got an armful of Hiccup. Terrified for a moment, she stretched her neck to check, but his foot was still working the pedal, even though he was unconscious.

More than a little worried stillâ€”he'd been fine during the flight!â€”she shifted him until she had a comfortable hold. She settled her arms underneath his, his neck stretching a little as his head rested on her shoulder. Some part of her winced, both at the painful-looking black eye and scrapes now close to her face, and because the spikes digging into his scalp couldn't be comfortable.

He didn't wake up, though, so it couldn't be that bad. Astrid glanced down and paused. Without the low-beaten brow and the snarky twist of his lips, Hiccup almost lookedâ€”peaceful.

It was a good look on him.

The dragon warbled underneath them, twisting its head to show one toxic eye, the pupil blown wide. Astrid's own eyes narrowed at the sight.

Whatever had just happened to Hiccupâ€”there was no doubt in her mind that it was the Night Fury's fault. The boy had been growling, and had something she could only guess was a feverâ€”he'd snarled, which was weird in and of itself, but he'd snarled at that thingâ€”the kid she knew was not that brave. The Hiccup she knew didn't have enough guts to stand up to a dragon. The Night Fury had made him something other than that Hiccup.

It had possessed him.

Berk appeared, beautiful in the fact that it laid unchanging even though so much else had, and the dragon angled for the woods beyond itâ€”no doubt that cove she'd discovered them in. Good.

Because when they were back on the ground, when she got her hands on it, it was going to regret what it did to Hiccup.

* * *

><p>Hope y'all liked it!

**Until tomorrow!
>

PEACE,

~Tibki

17. Chapter 17

Hey y'all!

Greetings from back in Mississippi!

**Actually, last chapter was from home too, but I was too tired to think straight, to be honest, and didn't do the best job revising

everything. If you find/found a problem, please let me know!**

I know a lot of you are looking forward to this chapter, but first, a word to my reviewers and those who read and enjoy but choose not to review (which is perfectly fine):

HELLO MY LOVELIES. I have been getting several reviews mentioning that sleep is hard to come by when I'm posting so much so quickly. As you are my lovelies, the idea of you sacrificing sleep for my fic makes me horrified-your health comes first, after all.

I set up a poll on my profile. Hit YES if you'd like me to slow it down a little-maybe a day or two between each chapter. NO if you want to keep the current set up of a chapter a day. This is just to make sure you're all okay, and I hope we can clear this up quick either way. :)

Anyway. Hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN_</p>

When I woke up, I thought that the entire, wonderful flight through the clouds with Astrid had all been a dream. I thought that the only thing that had been real was her swinging her axe at Toothless, the two of them fighting.

â€|This was mostly due to the fact that what woke me up was them screaming at each other.

"No! You get away from him! I'm not going to let you hurt him again!"

"You stupid squish, I am trying to help him! And if you don't let me past I am going to blow you and your ridiculous fake claw to ashes**!"**

That got me up. **"N**o, Toothless, don't**!"** I screeched, shooting to my feet and holding a hand out, giving me my first look over the whole situation.

Astrid was standing a few yards in front of me, Reginlief held high with both hands. Toothless was crowded up in front of her, wings wide and his eyes threatening.

At the sound of my voice, both of them frozeâ€"Toothless's wings, spread to make himself look intimidating (something that usually worked on everyone who wasn't me), fell to the ground, his ears popping up and eyes widening in surprise. Astrid, on her part, jumped and turned around, Reginlief slipping out of her fingers and dropping to the ground.

Normally, at this point, I would've dived, grabbed the axe, and thrown it out of reach so that these guys wouldn't try to kill each other, again.

But then pain struck my mind like lightning. It filled it like

boiling lava and pounded at the walls like Mj  lnir itself, and I found myself barely able to think, much less act.

"_AH!_" I fell back to my knees, clutching at my pounding, burning, splitting temples.

I could remember  "I don't know, everything and nothing. We'd been flying along peacefully one minute, and the next, there was a horrible _sound_ in my ears, a terrible high-pitched screech, resounding in my head like an echo between really close walls. Like violent waves destroying a reflection, it shook everything inside until it was in pieces, every and any coherent thought destroyed, and then there was only this rough, grating voice that I had no choice but to follow.

Grabbing onto Toothless  "bringing out that burning fire in my chest and mixing our two selves together  "had been something almost like a defensive instinct. When our  | when what _had been_ just a connection deepened into that something _more_, when two turned into one, the voice in our heads doubled, but the pain was easier to ignore with the warmth flowing from both bodies into the other.

The rest was a fog, and a blur of emotion and orders, with a small amount of free thought to ignore them but an overwhelming compulsion to follow them. I remembered anger, and disdain, and maybe a little bit of fear  "

  "and a truly, truly _massive_ dragon that Toothless, well, _we_, kinda, had called  "

I snorted at the memory, then whimpered as it _doubled_ the agony still wearing away at my head.

It hurt so _much_   "the place in my skull where the voice had been was like a bleeding, festering _blister_, the center of the radiating throbs that  "

Suddenly, the throbs started _growing_, leaving the cage of my cranium and blasting through my body like waves on a stormy sea. I gagged, in shock and left unable to scream, and fell onto my rear, curling tightly into a ball.

When my voice did come back, the worst had passed, but the ripples continued. "Oh gods  "oh gods make it stop. _Please_, Thor, make it _stop_  " "

"Hiccup!" I somehow heard Astrid, through the blood pounding in my ears. "Hey, no  "you get away from him, you  " _aaaaah!_"
Splash!"

And then there was a warm and familiar presence beside me, a sympathetic croon that was as comforting as it was wordless. Without even thinking about it, I reached out with both hands and hugged Toothless tight, the heavenly calm pouring through my veins like cool water, beginning wherever my skin touched scales.

Whimpering in relief, I pressed my face hard into his shoulder. "Toothless," I whined, in Norse, holding on tighter. "Help, please  |"

"I**t's alright, Cousinâ€"just breathe, it'll pass, you'll be fine**â€" he warbled, comforting but also sounding sad, and regretful.

The deep resonation in his chest, nearly shaking my entire body with its strength, felt really good. The pain started easing away, the sore in my head healing, slowlyâ€"somehow, I knew there'd be a scar, if the mind could have scars.

I took a slow and steady breath, like he said, and felt my head slowly calm. My headâ€" |

_That _thing_ was in my _head_!_

Bile surged at the thought and, barely turning my head in time, I threw up.

Vomit splashed on the ground, and some on Toothless's scales, but he didn't even look at it. Instead, he put his nose into my hair and snuffed, breathing steady. ***"I**t's okay, Squish, just let it out**â€" | ***

Feeling even more sour bile rising in my throat but not wanting to get any more sick on him, I pulled awayâ€"bad idea. The pain _immediately_ returned and I dropped to my hands and knees, heaving more contents of my stomach onto the floor. When it was empty, the retches continued, driven by the agony still coursing through my veins.

"H**iccup**!"

Toothless tucked his head under my chin and chest, lifting until I wasn't horizontal anymore, his touch stopping the retching quickly. His tail kept me from falling over backwardsâ€"good thing, because I wasn't sure I wouldn't collapse a third timeâ€"until I was able to use my hands to prop myself up behind me.

I looked up and saw Toothless's concerned and sympathetic gaze in front of me. "Whatâ€"what in Hel's name was that?" I asked, panting heavily. The sudden pain and the throwing up had sapped me of energy pretty quickly.

"A** side effect**," Toothless explained gentlyâ€"not a tone of voice I was too used to him having. ***"W**hen you come out of the parasite's control, your mind needs to re-adjust to beingâ€"well, you. It needs a moment before it can heal the wound left by her, just like mine did**."***

Like his didâ€" |? Suddenly, I remembered that first day seeing a trapped black dragon in a cove, acting like he was in pain. A dragon who burned in the sun then but never had a problem later onâ€"gods, had he been going through this then? _Alone_?

"Hiccup!"

Before I could think of an answer, or rather, a question for my cousin, the scream made us both turn to see Astrid, dripping wet, pull herself out of the lake. I flinched at the fury in her eyes as she turned her gaze to Toothless and started running. "_You! _You get_ away _fromâ€" |"

"No, Astrid, stop, please!" I yelled, trying to sit up. Toothless used a paw to keep my legs down, because no way was I safe to stand, but didn't stop me otherwise.

She stopped coming towards us, but there was still murder in her eyes. "Hiccup! It possessed you!"

"Yeah, I know, butâ€"

***N**o, Cousin, she means me**.*

I snapped my head to the side, eyebrows meeting. "What?"

Toothless snorted. ***T**hat flaming female squish of yours is under the impression that I took over your body and mind. Please correct her, since unlike you I can't flaming speak Norse and would like to have her flaming stop trying to kill me in order to protect you***.

(He didn't swear that muchâ€" flaming was the dragon equivalent of fu(kingâ€"which had been fun to find out, considering my nickname little flameâ€"unless he was seriously annoyed. I knewâ€"I'd gotten him to that point several memorable times.)

My mouth fell open in a gape, then snapped shut. I looked over to Astrid, who was glaring at Toothless again. "You think Toothless possessed me? Toothless?" I pointed to his head. "This Toothless?"

Her arms rose, and a wild look entered her eye. "Yes! It did! Youâ€"you weren't speaking Norse and you two were moving together like some kind of freakishâ€"

"That wasn't possession!" I yelled, cutting her off. \$hit, she'd noticed when we'dâ€| urgh. Connected, which I'd used for the less consuming warmth between us, didn't seem like the right word. It wasn't a connection, it was more than that. It was deeper; not a simple rope hooked between two things, more like those two becoming the same thing. I stood, shaking, and kept one hand on Toothless, for balance and to keep that pain at bay. "That wasâ€"

I frowned, unable to go on. I glanced over at Toothless. "Actuallyâ€| I don'tâ€| have a better word for it. You got anything?"

Toothless snorted and shook his head. ***I**t'd be untranslatable**.*

Sighing, I scraped my hand through my hair. "Lookâ€"Astrid, it's, it's like possession w-without all the negative connotation!" She looked at me as if I were insane. "And it wasn't even him possessing me, if anything it was the other way around andâ€"

***N**o, both ways**.*

Surprised, I looked at him. "Really?"

***Y**up, I think I'd be able to kick you out if I really wanted to**.*

"Huh. We'll have to try that sometime." Astrid's completely gobsmacked expression brought me back to the more important task at hand (and also made me realize that she was hearing me converse with a dragon that to her was just growling at me). "But anywayâ€"look, it's a lot more complicated than you'd think. But Toothless _isn't_ trying to hurt me, he never would!"

She seemed stuck on something thoughâ€"not entirely surprising, Vikings tended to have the jaw strength of Gronkles when it came to certain things. "_You_ possess _him_?"

"Sort of? Apparently he has a choice in it too, butâ€" I dunno, neither of us is the one who _gets_ possessed. It's a completely consensual, two-wayâ€" possession. I reallâ€" I really need a better word for it, but there it is." I groaned and rubbed at my forehead. "Argh, this is so messed up. Toothlessâ€" what in Hel's name _was_ that thing back there?"

"Obviously it was their queen." Astrid's voice surprised me and we both looked up. Her jaw was tight and that wild gleam was still in her eye, but her voice had been strong. "And by the wayâ€" you think _you_ have questions? Right now, you and the overgrown lizardâ€" "

"H**ey, watch it**!"** Toothless snarled at the insult. ***"Y**ou soon-to-be-_crispy_**â€"

"â€"Are the best informed ones out of all of us andâ€" "

"Hey," I warned, pointing at him. "We don't roast friends. And Astrid is a _friend_, remember?"

***"S**he called me a _lizard_**!"** he whined. I eyed him and he grumbled, but backed down.

"â€"and why in _Helheim_ does it seem like you're _talking_ to it!" she finally shrieked, making us both wince at the volume.

Ahâ€" crap. I glanced down at Toothless. I'd hoped to only have to tell her _one_ secret tonight, but it looked like one more was coming out. "â€" B-because I am," I admitted heavily, flinching badly and glancing at her from the corner of my eye. I was never too comfortable revealing anything I was accustomed to hiding-Dad's and Gobber's glares of disapproval and anger had almost beaten that into me. "I-I can speak Dragoneseâ€" well. Night Fury. Iâ€" speak. Night Fury."

Astrid stared at me. "You. Speak. To the dragons."

Shrugging awkwardly, I motioned to my side. "To Toothless. The othersâ€" well, if I _touch_ them, I can understand them, but otherwise, I-I'm just as confused as any other human."

"Oh." Astrid closed her eyes and shook her head, taking a slow and calming breath. "Okay. One out of eight hundred _thousand_ answered."

That made me cringe again. Too busy recovering from thatâ€" parasite, Toothless had called itâ€" I hadn't really given her any thought. To

be honest, I was, as always, impressed by her strengthâ€"anyone else would've flown to pieces long before this, not stand up and 'protect' me from what she thought was danger.

"Yeah, I guess you are probably a little lostâ€"sorry." Her jaw clenched again, but she nodded.

Before she could ask whatever other question was on her mind, though, Toothless broke in. **"S**he's not our queen**."**

I looked down at him and Astrid asked, "â€"What'd it say?"

"That she isn't their queen," I replied, a little confused. "He called herâ€"a parasite, earlier. â€"Aaand something a lot worse, to her face, before that." She gave me a strange look, and I blushed. "Uhâ€"I think it wasâ€"a rotting sea serpent's eel of a tapeworm?" Toothless grinned devilishly and I rolled my eyes. "That's like, really, really, really bad in Dragonese."

"I'll take your word for it," Astrid said, still looking at me strangely. She looked at Toothless, also still suspicious. "But they take orders from herâ€"it's like a beehive, right? She's the queen."

"Beehiveâ€"to a point**,"** Toothless replied. He made a face, like the idea had somehow left a bad taste in his mouth. **"S**he does control us, by settling a part of her mind into ours and forcing us to do her will, but she is not our mother and certainly not dragon royalty**."**

The insulted prideâ€"remember, the Night Fury is called a dragon "prince"â€"was hard not to pick up, but I ignored it, looking over at Astrid so I could translate. "The mind controlâ€"I think that's what hit us, up there, and why I reactedâ€"like thatâ€"when I woke up hereâ€"the mind control is right. But I think their relationship is different."

Toothless nodded. **"H**er kind is the bane of our race. They fly to islands as small babies, the size of Terrors, and gain followers to feed them. Let the dam#ed thing simmer at high heat for about three hundred years, mix with plenty of food, and boomâ€"mountain-sized parasite to an entire Nest**."**

I translated that to Astrid, and he continued. **"T**o be accurate, she's not even a dragonâ€"her entire species come from one mother, Hel**."**

That made me pause, doing some quick thinking. "Wait. But that makes youâ€"?"

Toothless winced. **"E**ffectively half-siblings, yes. Thankfully, I take more after our sire**."**

A horrible, horrible thought came to mind. "Our sire. Right. So since we'reâ€" I motioned from him to me, "â€"then that means me and that thing areâ€"?"

"Unfortunately, yes**."** I felt like throwing up again, my face greening. **"B**ut only throughâ€"well, marriage, I think is the squish word for it. And you should be gratefulâ€"only Night Furies,**

and, apparently, our aeries, probably as fellow children of the gods, can escape her will as much as we did. If I'd been a Two-Head or a Nightmare, Thor forbid, I would've tossed the both of you right into her mouth**."**

"â€|Oh. Okay. That _does_ make me feel a little better. Barely." I shook my head, trying to force the bile back down my throat. "Gods. Well, that's one more relative I'm hoping will skip the reunion."

"Did you just say _relative_?"

Astrid was here.

My spine snapped straight in absolute _horror_. Astrid was _here_ and I'd _forgotten_ and she was _listening_ and oh gods what had she heard, had I said it? _Had I said it_? How much did she know? Oh gods, oh gods, oh _Thor_â€"

I didn't realize I was shaking, or whimpering, until Toothless pressed into my side and stepped hard on my left foot. Yelping, I looked over to him, terrified. **"T**oothless, sheâ€"Iâ€"oh gods**â€"***

"Just tell her, Squish**."**

My mouth fell in absolute shock, before his words registered. **"_**T**ell her_**?"** I screeched, the sound echoing sharply through the cove, making Astrid cover her ears and look at me in pure shock. I barely noticed. **"I** can't _tell_ her, she'll _know_ and _no one_ can _ever_ know**!"**

That's all I'd been told for agesâ€"run in the dark when you're _sure_ its safe, and only if you _have_ to; never let anyone see you not get burnt, fake pain if necessary; _don't_ let anyone find out ever_. Glaring grey-green eyes and disappointed old blue ones hovered over my entire life, the words engraved into my skull and never forgotten. It was my biggest secret and it had been hammered into me since I was pretty much born, to _keep_ it a secret.

Everything else, I was just uncomfortable revealingâ€"but this? The very thought _terrified_ me.

Toothless gave me an unimpressed look. **"A**nd how the Hel else are you going to explain how you're able to speak Dragonese to her? Half the sounds you just made aren't even possible for most squishes, and she's not going to buy that you learned an entire language _with_ new sounds in less than two moons**."**

My eyebrows met high, terror and fear meeting with his logic, clashing like swords, and I whined. And worse, worse, it was _Astrid_. The girl I'd been crushing on since we were six! As if he read my mind, though I could tell he hadn't, Toothless's eyes softened.

"It'll be alright, Squish. If she can take _me_, she'll be okay with you**,"** he crooned.

Closing my eyes, I swallowed. "You're right. You're right, you're right, you're right, and I _hate_ it when you're right." Toothless

smirked. I looked over to the completely baffled and just a little scared Astrid and sighed. She'd probably be a lot more scared, after this. "Youâ€¦ you might want to sit down."

Carefully, I took my hand off Toothlessâ€"no pain, and I was totally counting that as a victory because I was terrified of a loss on the horizonâ€"and walked over to the shore of the lake, where my firepit still sat.

Astrid followed, slowly, and sat down, her legs crossed. It wasn't on the opposite side of me, almost close by despite the wariness in her eyes, so I gave her a shaky smile, before pulling my strike-a-light out and kneeling into the pit. She was still soaking wet, which wasn't a good thing to be at night on Berkâ€"a fire would dry her up quickly, and give me a chance toâ€¦ show.

"Why don't you have theâ€¦ I mean, Toothless light it?" she spoke up, eyeing my cousin carefully. "Wouldn't that be easier?"

"Easier, yes," I nodded. "More dangerous, also yesâ€¦ remember those burns I had on my arms a few weeks back?" She nodded, then her eyes widened. "Toothless felt really bad about it, so I do the campfires now." Swallowing at what I was about to do, I scraped the striker with trembling hands and a tiny spark hit the charry logs, half-burned and half damp with the lake's mist in the pit.

Astrid gasped as the little spark grew bigger, then erupted into a flame, then a roaring fire in seconds. I pulled away and sat back, watching it nervously. "How didâ€"how did thatâ€¦? Those logs wereâ€"!"

"Fireâ€¦ likes me," I replied, wrapping my arms around my knees, looking into the flames and not at her. "It gets, uhâ€¦ bigger, hotter, when I'm around. That, that's why the spark of Nadder fire that barely caught the thatch burned the forge to the ground ten years ago."

Her attention caught, I motioned to my chest. "I'm also likeâ€"I dunno, like 75% fireproof? I can't get burned, on my body, or my head. My arms and legs are a-a different story. When I grabbed Erik off that stall, I didn't go for Gobber's apron. I ran under my desk in my workshop and curled into a ball, keeping him and my limbs under my back, so none of them would burn."

Astrid was completely silent. A glance told me she was watching with enormous eyes. I licked my lips and continued. "Weâ€"Dad, Gobber, and I, we're the only ones who knowâ€"we figure it's because fire is likeâ€¦ you know, when lightning strikes Midgard, it usually just vanishes without leaving any big affect? Maybe, I dunno, a crater or something, but otherwise, boom and gone?

"Except. S-sometimes, lightning makesâ€¦ it makes fire. Fire is a product of lightning." I screwed my eyes shut. "I'm. Uh. A product. Of lightning."

There was no response for the longest time, and when I peeked my eye open to look at Astrid, she was looking at me like I'd grown antlers. "I have no idea what you just said."

Toothless snorted from his spot across the fire. I wasn't sure if he

was making fun of my explanation or her not understanding, so I just glared at him, but Astrid got my attention away. "So youâ€¦_affect_fire, and you can't be hurt by it, mostly, and you can talk to dragons, _like_ a dragonâ€¦"Hiccup, _how_?" she asked, looking extremely confused. "How can youâ€¦?"

Maybe it would be better to justâ€¦| show her. I sighed and looked around the dark and quiet cove, still nervous, before scooting closer. She watched me warily, but I turned my back to her.

My hands were shaking as I lifted the inch or so of hair that hung loose over the part of my neck behind my right ear.

Astrid gasped, and I pulled away and turned around to see her eyes impossibly huge, her hands covering her mouth.

"That'sâ€¦!"

I nodded quickly. There was no way she wouldn't recognize MjÃ¶lnir; it was a very popular symbol for Vikings to wear, including the Viking women. Believed to bring good luck and Thor's favor, I also knew for a fact that

"And it's not aâ€¦?"

"It's not a tattoo," I quickly said, spreading my hands. "It's, uh, it's a birthmark. It, and-and the fire thing, and-and someâ€¦| _other_ things, we call themâ€¦| Gifts. From myâ€¦|" My throat caught, an instinctive last defense, so I screwed my eyes shut and forced it out. "â€¦|g-grandfather."

"Your _grandâ€¦_but that's, that's _Thor's hammer_, Hiccup!" I nodded and lowered my head, squeezing my eyes shut harder.

"Y-y-you'reâ€¦"you're Thor'sâ€¦"great OÃ°in All-_Father_!"

I winced, flinching, and glanced back up through my bangs. "P-please, donâ€¦| don't freak out about this?"

She gaped at me. Apparently that was too much to ask. "Don't freak out? Don't _freak out_? That the scrawny son of the Chieâ€¦" Astrid paled. "Oh godsâ€¦"is Chief _Stoick_â€¦?"

I shook my head quickly. "No! N-no, Dad'sâ€¦| uh, completely human? Notâ€¦| not _Ã•smegir_. W-we don't even like _thinking_ about, about it. My, my mom wasâ€¦| _his_ daughter. Th-that's why there was a storm, the night I was born. _He_, " I glanced up to the skies, and when she understood, she paled further, "wasn't happy about herâ€¦| dying."

"Hiccup," Astrid whispered, shock making her eyes bright.

"You'reâ€¦"you're one-quarter _god_! _You_!" I smiled, nervous and still terrified. She lunged forward-I flinched again, but she didn't hesitate-and wrapped her hand around my wristâ€¦"to my shame but not surprise, her fingers met her thumb, with plenty of space left. "How canâ€¦" _you_â€¦"you can't even lift a sword!"

"That's not true!" I protested weakly. "Fâ€¦|for the most part! I can get the tip off the ground. For likeâ€¦| a minute." I shook my head. "L-look, I know, it's hard to take in, an-and harder to believe, but it's true. I swear."

Astrid frowned. "Iâ€¦ think believe you," she assured me slowly, like she was working that out herself as she said it. I blinked in surprise. "I'm justâ€¦well, you're right, it is a lot to take in. But it's the only explanation that makes sense. And now I'm re-evaluating everything I've ever done to you over the last fifteen years, and I think I owe Thor a couple thousand sacrifices in thanks for him not _striking me down_â€¦" She paused, watching as I winced, and realization dawned on her face. "â€¦Which is part of the reason you never told anyone. You don't anyone to treat you like the almighty Thor's only grandson."

Despite wincing when she _said it out loud_, I smiled shakily because she understood. "I'm me, before I'm my ancestors, or my family, or my village," I said. "It took me a while to realize that it wasn'tâ€¦ _bad_ to be something different from all of Berk. That it wasn't bad to be me, to want to makes friends with dragons, instead of kill them."

I motioned to Toothless, who was watching us with calm eyes. "He helped a lot. Night Furies aren't born, they're made, by Hel and Thor. That whole 'unholy offspring of lightning and death itself' shtick isn't just words. So, since Thor made him, and via my mother, me, we'reâ€¦ Cousins. That's why I can understand and speak to him easily."

"And that's also why you canâ€¦ possess each other?"

"I really need a new name for that."

"You really do." She shrugged. "At least the eyes are nice and scary."

What? I looked over to her, confused. She caught my eye and raised a brow. "The eyes? You know, when you're beingâ€¦or gettingâ€¦whatever, when you two do your thing? Did you not know?"

"Know _what_?" I asked, not having a single clue what she was talking about.

Y**our eyes change when weâ€¦ do our thing, as she put it**,
Toothless broke in. I stared at him as he rolled onto his back, releasing a long and relaxed breath. ***T**hey almost look like mine**."***

"They _what_?" I yelped, my hands moving to my cheekbones. "What do you mean _like yours_?"

W**ell, they lose that ugly squish circular pupil**â€¦"

"With_out_ the negative squish references for once, please!" I asked, Dragonese hissing nearly breaking through the Norse.

"They did look like his eyes," Astrid agreed. I looked at her, begging for her to explain. "The green wasâ€¦more like his, and the iris was a bit bigger, maybe. Your pupils were slitted."

I gaped at her, then groaned and dropped my head into my hands.
O**h great. What's next, am I gonna grow _wings_**?" I

whined.

T**hor, I hope not**, Toothless decided to comment. ***Y**ou'd be a terrible flier**."***

That earned him a glare. He didn't even notice. Astrid giggled, and the sound made me stare at her in shock. She caught my look and scowledâ€”there, much more normal. "Tell anyone I did that and your grandkids'll regret it."

I raised my hands. "Mum's the word, promise!"

Astrid nodded, satisfied, before looking up from the fire and around. "C'mon."

I frowned as she stood. "Where're we going?"

"Back to the village." My terror must've shown on my face, because she rolled her eyes. "Relaxâ€”I'm not going to tell anyone about the Thor thing, but your dad needs to know about the Nest."

That wasn't any better! "No!" I yelped, shooting to my feet and surprising her. "No, you can't! If we do, they'll wanna know how we got there and they'llâ€”they'll kill Toothless!"

T**hey can try**."

"You're not helping!" I snapped before looking back at her. "Astrid, no, we need toâ€”we need to think this through, carefully."

Her eyebrows flew high. "Hiccup, we just discovered the Dragon's Nest!" she said. I winced and turned away. "The thing we've been after since Vikings first sailed here! And you want to keep it a secret? Whâ€”to protect one dragon, are you serious?"

Jaw clenching, I turned around and met her eyes, certainty solid in every shred of my body. There was no way my answer would be anything other than a firm "Yes."

Astrid's eyes softened, some of the angry disbelief fading from them. I glanced away after a minute, looking over to Toothless, who'd rolled back onto his stomach, watching us.

"You'd do anything to protect Erik. If Bjorn had gone with the others, he would've died rather than let G-Germdish get killed. Even the twinsâ€”they'd spar with Hel herself to make sure the other kept breathing. Toothless and I, we're Cousins, technically, but we're more than that. A family of dragons is called an aerie, Astrid, and he's mine."

I turned back to her, determination turning my insides into a solid, immovable rock. "I will not let anything happen to him," I said, and the words felt strangely heavy. The thing in my chest moved, and somehow, I felt like that was an oath I hadn't known I was about to take.

But not knowing I had been about to make it, didn't mean I wouldn't hold to it with my own life. Tribe or not, my father or not, Toothless would not get hurt. Not if I could do anything to help it.

{Astrid had never known Hiccup to stand up for himself not like this-not with determination, with a very Vikingly stubbornness and _sureness_ that he was right. The sight of his green eyes, firm and serious, was new-and a wonder in and of itself.}

{{It would take her some time to realize that her view of Hiccup who changed irrevocably in that moment-she'd never seen him like this before, but that was because he'd never had anyone to truly _defend_, before. Hiccup never stood up for himself, soft and pliable as pondwater-but when it was his family, he became pure ice. _Nothing_ was more important to him.}}

Astrid looked surprised and"and _soft_. "Okay," she said, her voice gentler than I'd ever heard it. "But then what are we going to do?"

I had _no_ idea. "Just" give me until tomorrow. I'll figure something out."

She nodded, accepting that. "Alright."

A fist slammed into my arm, nearly sending me flying into the fire. "Ow!"

"That was for kidnapping me," Astrid said, but her face wasn't really that angry.

I glanced back at Toothless, who'd decided to dunk himself in the lake to wash the vomit off his leg. (I made a note to myself to give him a really, _really_ good pumice-scrub before going home.) "What, no threats for her hitting me this time?"

Toothless poked his head out of the water and gave me a _look_.
"Even _I_ could tell that was some kind of weird squish mating ritual**."**

Shock and embarrassment and like thirty different other things instantly filled me up, but before I could _begin_ to think of a reply to that, Astrid almost _nervously_ grabbed the front of my flight suit and pressed her lips to my right cheek.

Her lips"_my cheek._

"That's for"everything else."

She left me standing there, shocked and numbly feeling joy somewhere, running out of the cove with barely a glance back.

Toothless popped up at my side, glancing at my cheek. **"W**as that it**?"** he asked, sounding _way_ too eager for my tastes. **"D**id you mate**?"**

"Wha"_"TOOTHLESS!_ I'm not having this conversation with you _again_**!"**

* * *

><p>Astrid paused at the echoing screeches coming from the area of the woods behind her. She remembered the day with the

Scauldron, and how hearing such similar sounds had sent them all running back to the villageâ€”because no one wanted to tangle with a pair of Night Furies.

But somehow, this time, the noise didn't send well-taught wariness, or anger at the dragon's brazen presence on their island, or even the thirst for battle through her anymoreâ€”instead, she listened this time, and heard the underlying halting gurgle that could only be described as _laughter_, and she smiled.

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it!

I'm fairly certain the whole sleep thing was kinda a joke, but I want to make sure, just in case. So, the poll is up!

PEACE,

~Tibki

18. Chapter 18

Hey y'all!

FAINT OF HEART, DO NOT READ AHEAD. IF YOU DISLIKE BUGS, SKIP THE NEXT FEW PARAGRAPHS.

So I got home and made the tally: I was gone during the height of bug season here, so I went around the house, checking the double-paned windows for what's been growing inside of them. It's a lot of fun because one of my sisters is terrified of bugs (esp. moths, she freaked out when we found this white one bigger than my fist in Soph's window) and I'm curious as to how much they multiply over a period of 6 weeks.

So, we have another funnell web weaver (Scorpio III, named for the cm-long scorpion-like fangs; an inch and a half long), scattered smaller spiders, and two massive red wasp nests. I didn't count them in the living room, but the one in my room, maybe two feet from the head of terrified sister's bunk bed, had 30 wasps on it yesterday.

And now that I've grossed you out. :D

YOU'RE CLEAR.

The overwhelming reply from the poll is NO, with 90% of votes. So a chapter a day it shall be! Please remember to sleep, though. I worry about my lovelies. Don't worry if you get behind, there's plenty of time to catch up, after all. :)

I know you've been waiting for this chapter, so I won't keep you any longer. On with the show, hope you enjoy!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN</p>

When I woke up the next morning, I had a plan.

Okay, maybe that was a tad bit of an exaggeration. I had an idea, and my fingers crossed.

The day that a Viking teenager was to kill his first dragon in front of the village was a big celebration, on the same level as a small religious holiday, just with a lot more beer and feasting. So, after an absolutely massive dagmal with every kind of delicacy offered to me as the one chosen to go into the Ring (I'd never eaten so much in my life), the entire village went into the bright sun to set up and pray at various temporary and permanent shrines to the gods around the island.

(Remembering how the last beautiful day had turned out, I didn't agree with the others that the blue sky was a good omen.)

People flocked to the ones for Oðin, Freyja, Sif, and Magni. While they were busy, and before I started my own prayers, I took half a second to run the secluded back paths in order to give Toothless his breakfast.

He gave me a surprise thenâ€”Toothless told me that if I didn't think it was possible to get out of there alive without doing it, I should kill the Nightmare. He told me to forget him, forget any other thing except survival; he said it was because he liked flying and fish, and he didn't like starving in a hole, but the concern wasn't exactly hard to pick up on.

I'd told him then and there that I knew I wouldn't be able to do it, even if Magni himself suddenly decided to zap me with enough strength to manage it. Toothless had just sighed and put his forehead on mine, and told me not to do anything stupid, but that ******since you are, at heart, a stupid Squish, that's probably a pointless thing to ask.******

(I don't know how long we stayed there, wrapped up in that warmth, too terrified to think it might be the last time, but it was almost too long; Dad's eyes asked me where I'd been when I got back. Luckily, he didn't say anything aloud.)

After I left the cove, I made appearances at the shrine to Oðin and Magni, laying small sacrifices at each altarâ€”they were round little trinkets, small, but painstakingly carved, inlaid, and set with enameled metal to represent the gods as well as I could. I'd made them ages ago, to practice detail work, and I figured this was probably the best use for them I would ever find.

Sif I prayed to, but didn't visitâ€”a battle was exactly what I was hoping to avoid.

(I did visit Loki's abandoned shrine, quietly, gave him a trinket too, and asked him very nicely to not kick me in the face today. Figuring he would relate, as a blood-brother to Thor, I mentioned Toothless and I and how I really didn't want to see either of us deadâ€”especially him.)

The last shrine I visited was Thor's. As I'd expected, there were flowers and thick slabs of meat and precious things and even a some of our precious-few animals tied up, waiting to be slaughtered—more than on any other altar, except Odin's.

I knelt and laid my sacrifice at the feet of the statue of my grandfather—my first dragon book, the only one of my earliest notebooks to survive the forge-fire I'd saved Erik from. It wasn't exactly accurate, and was mostly filled with accounts of terror written in shaky and broken Norse, and it had drawings of various dragons that were done by a six-year-old and looked like it. But it was sentimental and I figured he'd appreciate the, well, sacrifice I was making by putting it there. And maybe, he would even like it the way human grandfathers liked things from their grandkid's childhood.

Please don't let me screw this up, I prayed, shutting my eyes tight.

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and I looked up to see my father standing behind me with a proud and approving smile. He was carrying a large, ornate axe—I recognized it from the house. "You lay down your old life," he said, nodding to the slightly charred, decade-old book, "to start your new one."

Dad laid the axe down beside the book, gently. I watched, my heart aching in the knowledge of how utterly _right_ he was.

"Your—grandfather—would be proud. I know I am."

The words stunned me into silence, because he'd _never_ said anything like that before. Choking up, I nodded silently and turned away from the shrine.

* * *

><p>The rituals took most of the morning, but they felt as fast as Thor's thunderbolts to me. Before anything more than thirty seconds, it felt like, had passed, everyone of age in Berk was crowded around the Ring's cage, and my father was on the platform above his special Chief's chair.<p>

I'd been ushered into the tunnel, with nothing but the clothes on my back and my helmet, but could hear his speech loud and clear, if with an echo, even from there—you could bet your last coin that as a Viking Chief, Stoick the Vast's thundering voice could carry over a crowd of 300 rowdy men and women with ease.

"Well, I can show my face in public again!" he began with, and I flinched badly—at the reminder of past failures, and possibly the one to come. Dad laughed over the crowd and continued. "If somebody told me that in a few short weeks, Hiccup would go from, well, being, uh—| _Hiccup_, to placing _first_ in dragon training? Well, I woulda tied 'im to a mast and shipped him off, for fear he'd gone mad!"

That one actually hurt less—mostly because I couldn't believe it myself. Six weeks ago, I'd been so sure that my life would be killing dragons and earning glory through gore, and I'd been absolutely

certain that bringing down a Night Fury would change things for me.

Well. I hadn't been wrong.

The village roared their approval and laughter. "And you know it!" Dad laughed. "But," and the crowd fell silent, almost immediately, "here we are. And no one's more surprised, or more _proud_, than I am.

"Today, my boy becomes a Viking. Today, he becomes _one of_ _us!_"

The crowd exploded into cheers and I felt something in me crack, alone in the tunnel.

"You got a plan?"

_Not so alone! _I jumped at the voice, releasing a squawk that had Astrid raising an eyebrow. Rubbing my throatâ€"it never really felt sore from Dragonese anymore, but the suddenness had shocked it a littleâ€"I glanced between her and the empty Ring. They'd let the Nightmare out soon.

"Sorta," I answered. She tilted her head, looking for a better answer, and I gave it to her, nodding to the different cages. "The Nadder's grouchy, but if you scratch her scales in the right spot, burnish them once in a while, and keep her fed with chicken, she's manageable. The Gronkle's lazy and likes to be put to sleep. The Terror is one-track-minded, give him food or something to chase and he'll love you forever. The Zippleback, gas head really likes yak milk. All dragons hate eels. If you justâ€| get to know them a little, you can talk them down, even without Dragonese."

Astrid nodded, looking a little happier. "So, what do you know about the Nightmare?"

A lot I didn't want toâ€"veterans had spent all of dagmal loading me up with information about weak points and arguing about what the proper way to tear it to pieces was. I'd forced myself to forget most of that, just to keep the bad images at bay. So really, what did I know about the Nightmare at the moment?

"Uhâ€| it catches fire?"

All the previous happiness disappeared from her face. Worry replaced it quickly. "Well thenâ€"be careful with that dragon."

"It's not the dragon I'm really worried about," I admitted, watching my father move to his chair above the Nightmare's cage, next to where Grandmother would stand. I turned around to face her. "Astridâ€| if all this goesâ€| _wrong_, please promise me you'll take care of Toothless. Make sure they don't find him andâ€"and keep him fed? He-he likes cod, a-and no eels, andâ€|"

I couldn't continue, so I closed my mouth, and then my eyes. I would drown a hundred times before I'd let him get hurt, and I was _not_ letting him starve in that hole, all alone, but _gods_, if I died, I'd miss him. I knew he'd miss me too, but maybe Astrid would even figure out the fin system and he'd fly again one day. She was smart

like that, she could manage it.

(I'd miss her, too.)

Her face was soft when I opened my eyes again. "I will," she promised quietly. "Just, promise me it won't go wrong."

I wish I felt confident enough to say it. Gobber saved me, in a way, by popping in. "It's time, Hicca!" I looked at him, at the proud grin crinkling his beady eyes. "Knock 'em dead."

With one last glance back at Astrid, I walked forward into the main Ring. Behind me, Gobber ducked behind the grate and pulled it all the way down, the wood hitting stone with a loud and final _boom_.

Halfway to the rack of weapons and shields, I lifted my mother's helmet and put it on my head, letting the black Berk crest stand proudly on the side.

The crowd was chanting my name, but it didn't give me confidence, only the knowledge that I was doing this in front of _everyone_. SÃ³l's light was harsh against the cold granite and half-rusted iron bars, like the goddess herself was frowning upon what was about to happen in here.

My heart was in my throat. The red of my father's massive, braided beard stood out like a drop of blood against the rock, and I could feel his gaze bearing down on me as I reached the rack.

Most of the spectators quieted nowâ€"it was an unspoken tradition that whatever a Viking used during their first kill would become their signature weapon, and there was a lot of strategy and thought that went behind every choice, taking dragon and personal fitness into account. Bets were often placed, and the measure of a Viking's success could be predicted in how intelligently he chose his principle weapon, or even just which one it was.

To allow flexibility, there was a wide range of them held up by pegs on the board, every last one intricate but unpaintedâ€"I'd choose my colors after the act. I recognized most of these things from the forge; Gobber and I had worked on them ourselves in the weeks leading to the start of dragon training. Hammer, spear, mace, sword, axe, bolaâ€"everything was here.

Never, when I was working that metal and stone and leather, did I think I'd be choosing one of them for myself.

The first choice was easy for me. I picked up one of the shields. The crowd murmured, somebody yelled that they'd won the pool, and I heard a few calls that it was a sign that I'd defend Berk valiantly when I became Chief.

Not _if_ anymore. _When_. No pride filled my chest with that statement.

Knowing I had to pick something else, I reached out and plucked the seaxe.

More mutters, some confusion. I saw my dad say something to

Gobberâ€"he probably would've gone for the hammerâ€"until Bjorn's voice came from the other side of the Ring.

"Like Germdish taught ye, Hikka!" Karhu shouted, sounding moved and proud. "Just like he showed ye!"

It was a reminder to everyone that P-Petri, dead only two days, had taught me to use the seaxe. The entire village roared its approval, seeing it as a symbol of respect for a fallen brother.

And maybe it was. But it was also the only weapon I ever used anyway. I looked down at the hilt and closed my fist around it. Sorry, Petri._

I pushed away the returned grief and took a steady, calming breathâ€"in through the nose, out through the mouth, also like Petri had showed me. Those wonderful afternoons he'd spent teaching me weren't all for nothing.

"I'm ready," I said, and any small pride that my voice hadn't shaken went completely unnoticed.

Gobber on my father's right pulled the lever, and the log holding the cage door closed slowly rose.

There was a second of silence beforeâ€"

BANG

The doors burst open, already burning with flames as they slapped hard against the stone walls. The Nightmare let out a snarling yowl, halfway out of the cage already and burning hot.

Everything grew hotter as the fire noticed I was there and climbed higher, eating more and more of the wooden doors. They'd probably need replacing after this.

The dragon snarled and roaredâ€"I had a feeling someone had rattled the cage beforehandâ€"as it leapt onto the wall of the Ring, using its claws to scramble around the side and up. When it saw the Vikings, it opened its maw, and everyone barely had time to get out of the way before a blast of flaming spittle was thrown clear through the chains.

No hole was made though, and the creature climbed higher, onto the bars and then the chain ceiling. When it hit the highest part and saw it was trapped, it stopped, the fires on its skin extinguishing.

I looked up at it, terrified at the display. It was bright red and streaked black, sharp spines and teeth and jet-black horns. The spines and even the wings it used as foreclaws were grown wavy to resemble flames, and they were all whole, razor-sharp and deadly. Despite the agitation it had obviously been put through, this thing had been treated a lot better than the more long-term residents.

Probably to make my final test that much more real. Suddenly, I hated Viking bloodthirst, for one more reason than normal.

The long, sinewy neck bent backwards as it saw the only other

occupant in the Ringâ€œme. Slit-pupil eyes narrowed, it contorted itself to touch the ground facing me, hitting the rock floor heavily.

This guy was so much _bigger_ than Toothlessâ€œ|

"Go on, Hiccup!"

"Give it to 'im!"

The Nightmare came forward, and I completely tuned out the calling villagers. Its mouth wasn't _feet_ away from my soft midsection, but I swallowed and pressed on.

Backwards.

Easing away, I let first the seaxe (_Sorry, Petri_) and then the shield (_Sorry, Gobber_) drop with a _clatter_, watching as the Nightmare's yellow eyes glanced at each when they hit the ground. Bringing my hands forward and still keeping the same distance between me and its teeth, I met its eyes and smiled.

The Nightmare made a suspicious hiss, and I eased my hands up and down in the universal symbol for _calm down_. "I-it's okay," I told him. "It's oookay. I'm not going to hurt you."

I'd managed to bring a _Night Fury_, the most reclusive and dangerous of dragons, around to my sideâ€œhow hard could a Nightmare be? All I had to do was get him to let me touch his skinâ€œ|

Knowing I still had one more sharp object on me, I lifted the Berk helmet off my head by the pointy horns. Just like Toothless had in the moments before I'd started to hear him, the dragon snorted, angling his head away.

I met the Nightmare's eyes fully and frowned. "I'm not one of them," I announced, before throwing the helmet away. It clattered dully on the stone floor, abandoned and cold.

(_Sorry, Mom._)

The Nightmare's pupils widened slightly, and I smiled.

"Stop the fight!"

My dad's voice, not even anywhere near full volume, carried even through the mental block I'd put over all other sounds, but I couldn't afford that. "No!" I called back, keeping my hands steady. "I need you all to see this. They're _not_ what we think they are. We don't have to _kill_ them, and this war has gone on for way too long." I let my right hand drop, offering my left palm for him to touch.

Let the trust be his choice.

"Hey there, big guy," I said, still smiling. "What'sâ€œ?"

"I said _STOP THE FIGHT!_"

** C-L-A-N-G**

The slam of Dad's hammer against the iron bar echoed loud and sharp against the Ring walls andâ€”_noiseâ€”| make lots of it!_â€” the Nightmare spooked.

YYYRRRRRAAAAH

I barely had time to snatch my hand back before it leapt forward, jaws snapping closed where half of my entire body had been half a second earlier.

The hissing of a dragon's gas gave me less than a second's warning, but it was almost enough for me to get out of the way of a blast of super-charged flames.

Almostâ€”the heat licked at my right bicep, and I screamed.

I didn't even notice it echo oddly, just focused on getting away, too terrified to even think about going full speed. Scrambling to the right, I circled around the Ring, hearing the claws and snarls right behind me. My heart pounded in my chest, but the thing right behind it flared in warning and I ducked to the left, just in time to avoid being snapped up like a minnow.

"Hiccup!" Astrid yelled from somewhere. I couldn't afford to pay it any attention, still running and ducking away from shots of fire and fast jaws.

Remembering our first lesson, I scattered for the rack, grabbing up a shieldâ€”only for the Nightmare to stamp on the entire thing, crushing it and knocking mine out of my hands. A wickedly thin, sharp black claw sliced into my side and I yelled out, but managed to get back on my feet.

I ran underneath the thing and behind it, feeling it turn on a dime and come after me again. Looping around towards the cage, I heard Astrid scream my name again before a solid thump told me something had hit the dragon.

The thing in my chest pounded, making my vision shake, and I stopped, spinning around just in time to see the Nightmare change directions, this time going forâ€”

"_Astrid!_"

I took off, the world blurring around me as I shot right past the furious and terrified dragon, snatching Astrid's arm and dragging her along with me off to the side.

Almost immediately after grabbing herâ€”meaning, by the time we were on the other side of the Ringâ€”I slowed back to a normal pace, glancing at her. She was green and pale, and staring at me with wide eyes; most of the village was probably the same way, but I wasn't looking at them.

I grinned nervously, terror at discovery dumping even more adrenaline into my system. "Uhâ€”| r-remember what I said, about other Gifts?"

(_Sorry, Dad?_)

"HICCUP!"

My dad's voice made me look upâ€”he had gotten into the tunnel, lifted up the door. "Sorry about this!" I yelled, grabbing her arm with both hands and taking off again, looping around to use the momentum to toss her in with him. Dad caught her easilyâ€”she was safe.

But the Nightmare hadn't had time to move since even my first sprint, and once it saw my blur, it opened its mouth.

Fire burst onto the wooden support beams next to me, and the hiss of burning flesh met my ears as my left upper arm was licked at by the heat.

I screamed, shooting away from the fire and deeper into the Ring, away from safetyâ€”my boots, however, could take no more and they tore, sending me flying to the ground.

I hit the stone hard, my bruised and burned and cut body crying out at the rapid-fire abuse and refusing to get up immediately.

The Nightmare took its chanceâ€”it slammed its paw down, the five claws caging my chest to the floor, one slicing a little rut through the top edge my shoulder. I screamed again, and pulled against the claws, seeing death above me in an arrowhead-shaped jaw and huge teeth.

_(Sorry,
Toothlessâ€”|)_

Whhhhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

OOOOOOOOOEEHH**â€”*****_**C**OUSIN**!**_***_**â€”**_

â€”_**BOOM**_

The plasma blast was the loudest, and at once the most beautiful and terrifying thing I'd ever heardâ€”because it meant that I would live.

But it also meant that _Toothless_ was in the Kill Ring.

Smoke, burning orange with super-heated air, filled the entire arena. I was still caught underneath the claws, but I felt the dragon above me jar when a black shape in the haze slammed into its side.

With a _shck_ the claws disappeared and I rolled out of the way. "_Toothless_" I screamed into the smoke.

"_**L**eave_â€”_him_â€”_alone_**!" I heard him roar, angrier than I ever remembered him being. Every word was punctuated with what sounded like claws against armored scales, and terror coursed through meâ€”were they Toothless's on the Nightmare's, or the other way around?

The smoke was clearing from the immense wind the two dragons' wings were making as they foughtâ€”I could see Toothless on the Nightmare's

back, snarling and trying to bite at the head.

The Nightmare stretched back with it's longer neck but overreached, sending them sprawling to the floor. Toothless ended up on the bottom, his forward facing teeth now useless but his talon-sharp claws slashing furiously as the Nightmare tried to get a good hold with its teeth.

L**et me up so I can_ rip you toâ€"ARGH**!**_*

Foot-long fangs sank into Toothless's front leg and I saw red.

"_Get OFF him_" I screamed, but when I tried to take off, my boots tripped me up again and I sprawled back onto the rock.

Useless, as alwaysâ€"|

Maybe not so much. It served well enough as a distraction, because the Nightmare released and looked up, giving Toothless enough time to kick it off with his powerful hind legs. It slammed against the far wall and Toothless rolled onto his feetâ€"not even paying any mind to the injured oneâ€"roaring at his opponent.

Toothless leapt in front of me, wings spread wide in protection. ***C**ome closer and I'll burn you to _ashes_, Fire-Skin**!"** he shrieked, glancing back quickly to draw closer, covering me better with the safety of his teeth and claws. Fury made his eyes burn like green fire, and hatred dripped from his unsheathed teeth. ***I**f you hurt my aerie _I will kill you and carry your bones to Hel myself**!**_****

The Nightmare tried to come forward again, but Toothless scared it back with a furious hissing snarl. When it tried a second time, he did the sameâ€"the third he wasn't so merciful.

Toothless released a blast, blowing a gaping hole in the rock at the Nightmare's feet, scorching its claws. ***Y**our only warning shot, eel-smelling _bastard**!**_**** he roared, jumping forward with spread wings.

The Nightmare backed off at the sight, slinking away and I couldn't blame himâ€"but the danger wasn't gone.

Vikings started pouring into the Ring like water into a rain barrel, every last one of them armed and prepared to kill. I leapt to my feet, running as much as I could over to his side. His bloodâ€"dark blue but thick as my ownâ€"seeped into my trousers.

T**oothless**, *** I whimpered, worried and urgent, ***y**ou have to get out of here, bud, goâ€"!"**

B**rainless squishes**!"** Toothless snarled, blind and deaf with rage. He tucked his wings in, pulling me protectively closer and making a smaller target of himself, ***L**eave my aerie _alone**!**_*

***N**o, Toothless, don't, you have to get out of here**!"**

And then my dad ran forward, axe in hand. "No!" I yelled, letting go of Toothless to reach towards him. "Dad, don't! He won't hurt you!"

****_**D**on'tâ€"threatenâ€"myâ€"AERIE**!*_****

Toothless shot forward, knocking Vikings out of his way with his wings and tail, his target in sight. My cousin and my father slammed into one another, rolling, Toothless ending up on top.

"Toothless, _stop_!"

He didn't listen, rising up over my dad's chest, wings spreading wide and opening his mouth, gas hissing for a blast.

"Noâ€" This was my worst nightmare, my best friend was about to _kill_ my fatherâ€"

****_**N**OOO_**!"**

EEEEEOOOOOORRRRAAAA

My _roar_ reverberated across the Ring, bouncing off the walls louder than it had been from my mouth and slicing into every ear like ringing knives. Half of the Vikings grabbed at their temples in pain and the others flinched at the volume.

When it stopped, the entire Ring was _silent_.

Toothless closed his mouth, smacking his lips at the taste of the gas as he turned back to me. His slitted eyes narrowed. **"H**iccup, what in flamingâ€"***?"**

"Get him!"

Uncle Spitelout threw what was left of a shield and it slapped directly into Toothless's face, getting a shriek of pain and anger out of him. The man jumped forward as he was shaking the stars out of his eyes, picking his head up and slamming it down on the ground, hard.

No less than five others piled on top of his fragile wings, thin bodyâ€" "No!" I yelled, trying to get forward. Astrid caught my chest, holding me back. "No, no, no, please jus-just don't hurt himâ€"!"

"_Traitor_!"

Astrid was _ripped_ off of my chest by a big hand and a huge force at my back shoved me to the floor. Weight was loaded onto my spine and my bruised and cut face was pressed onto the rock but I didn't even care, because I could see Toothless andâ€"

"Please, d-don't hurt hiâ€"!"

"Oh, shut up, traitor!"

Something white, heavy, and hard _slammed_ into my head and my world was tossed into an ocean current. Colors blurred and my vision tilted in every direction.

Muffled voices were yelling, and I heard Toothless roar somewhere around me.

The world fuzzed. I wondered if I was running, but it felt like my feet were in one place, or every place, it was hard to tell with everything shifting so muchâ€¦ Thoughts were hard to keep, but oneâ€¦one thing stuck in my mindâ€¦.

"Tooâ€¦lessssh," I slurred, my tongue not working right. My cousin wasâ€¦ hurt?â€¦I had toâ€¦ to get to him. "Too-lesssshâ€¦ whereâ€¦ areya bu-ud? Toolessssh!"

"He'sâ€¦ mad!" a watery voice somewhere claimed, fading in and out.

"No, _Mildew_ justâ€¦ nearly caved his headâ€¦!"

That was Astrid, somewhere to the leftâ€¦or rightâ€¦behind me? "Azztrd!" I managed, hoping she'd hear me, wherever she was. Hopefully she wasn't too far awayâ€¦ "Donâ€¦don le'em urtâ€¦ Toolessssh. E's a goo drag'nâ€¦ a goooâ€¦ cuzzâ€¦ zzn."

Somethingâ€¦ _big_ disappeared from my back, but my body wouldn't let me move. I tried, but my hands were sluggish, wouldn't move. "Azzztrd," I complained into the sea of colors in front of me. "Why wn'tâ€¦ m'arms move?"

There was a sharp _yank_ and pain flared through my arm and shoulder. Lots and lots of noise around me. I yelped as something rough dragged acrossâ€¦ my stomach?â€¦ but thenâ€¦

My world filled with black. Not the black of sleep, but a more familiar blackâ€¦almost an impossibly deep blue in places, and studded with smooth and shiny round scales.

Scalesâ€¦Toothless!

Dragging my arms as much as I could, I grabbed onto what part of my cousin I had, feeling the thing in my chest open slightly. A thin stream of warmth poured out, slipping through my hand and under the scales beneath. It wasn't nearly as much as usual, and even _it_ seemed dazed, but it worked.

Instantly, the presence of Toothless in my headâ€¦concerned, fearful, angryâ€¦cleared every cobweb and fuzz of color.

The sudden change left me reeling, my brain struggling to handle real thoughts again so quickly. I shook my head hard and blinkedâ€¦when my eyes decided to work right again, I found myself staring at grey rock and the far end of Toothless's tail.

"Whaâ€¦what happened?" Sitting up but keeping hold of the tail, I turned and looked around, paling instantly.

There were no less than fifty Vikings surrounding us, and we were in the Kill Ring. Astrid was standing at my side, glaring at the old, thin, crouched figure with a bone staff everyone knew as Mildew, (the wretched hermit no one really liked), and weathering the glares of quite a few of the men like they were nothing more than leaves thrown at her face.

She was braver than I was, and I also had about triple the amount of glares aimed my way.

I swallowed, and closed my eyelids, because the last thing they needed to see right now was my Night-Fury eyes as I strengthened the connection. **Toothless, you alright?** I asked, my priorities straight. **Your leg?**

My leg is **_fine,**_** but I have the weight of two rotting, Hel-dam^ed **_**Stone-Swallowers**_** in putrid, over-fed **_**squishes**_** on my back, so how in O****Ã°in-blessed flames do you **_**think**_** I am, you ridiculous, stupid, flaming little **_**Squish**_**?*

Yeah, he was okay.

I felt his mind prod into my body, cataloging injuries before pulling back. He grumbled and growled, but didn't say anything. The head injury apparently fixed (something I'd have to wonder at later, because no was _not_ the time), I wasn't seriously hurt, even if none of the slices, bruises, or burns were exactly paper cuts.

When he was all the way out of my head, I let his tail go and opened my eyes, looking up to the glares coming my way. My gaze focused on my father, the anger in his eyes, and I flinched. "Iâ€| I can explain, Dad," I said.

"Oh you will," Dad growled, almost sounding like a dragon himself. "Put it with the othersâ€|I'm going to have a _talk,_ with _him_."

"You should put the boy with the dragons too!" the shrill voice of Mildew called out. "Little unnaturalâ€|"

"If I _wanted_ your opinion, Mildew, I would've asked for it!" Dad snapped, turning his fury onto the thin man. Mildew withered and shut up.

That was a short reprieve from his glare and my only one for a whileâ€|not a second later, his huge hand clamped onto my collar and lifted, and he carried me like that out of the Ring, blood dripping from my arms and shoulder and side onto the cold stone floor.

I heard Toothless whine in worry behind me, and I screwed my eyes shut in order to resist answering, or looking back to him. That would only make things worse, for the both of us.

If they _could_ get worseâ€|

* * *

><p>Wheeeeeeee! Hope you liked it!
*

Oh, before I forget-for some reason, isn't letting me reply to every review anymore. I dunno why, they just say that they can't find the review. Please don't think I don't love you more than eternity, or that your reviews aren't worth responding; if I could, I'd be answering every review I get, like I always do. Your reviews are the very lifeblood of my inspiration and hopes and dreams, and never doubt I appreciate every last one. :)

****Until tomorrow, my lovelies,****

****PEACE,****

****~Tibki****

19. Chapter 19

****Hey y'all!****

****THIS IS WHERE YOU NEED TO START. STOICK'S AND HICCUP'S CHAPTER LIES BELOW.****

****Ready for today's chapter? It's something of a doozy.
:)****

****Results of the poll are in (I don't think I put this on last chapter's AN, but just in case) I will not be slowing down the story. Which is going to be fun because revision is taking longer and longer to manage.****

****Lovely shout out to all my lovely reviewers!****

****DISLCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

<p>CHAPTER NINETEEN_

Berk's Great Hall is carved into the side of the mountain; it was the pride of our village—every other tribe built theirs out of wood or stones and had to rebuild or repair often. Us? Never.

It was enormous, plenty big enough to fit all 350+ members of the village (elders and children included), with more than enough room left over for supplies and storage, for animals or food or firewood. When Devastating Winter hit, we'd spend the worst of the storms in there; homes could be rebuilt, but the Great Hall was a mountain, the mountain that made up the island. It was Berk itself. It would not fall.

Fewer people knew there was a second, smaller room carved into the same mountain, just off to the side, on a completely different face, not too far from where the Kill Ring was built. It was where we stored our religious artifacts during the winter.

Only the Gyoja and the Chief's family were ever allowed inside. It was dark, without a torch to its name, and the wood and stone statues of the gods that had been pulled out this morning were back safely in their niches along the wall. Their stony eyes looked down at us impassively from high above, cold and unfeeling.

The space was relatively narrow, and the only light came from the sun through the massive doors, and my dad heaved me into the room, letting me drop heavy and uncoordinated on the floor. I stumbled over the torn soles of my shoes but managed to get to my feet, turning around to see my fate stomping through the door, casting a shadow even bigger than he was in the sunlight, drowning me in

darkness.

"I should've known," Dad growled, and his anger was quiet—more terrifying than if he'd shouted and roared, because when he was quiet, he was really mad. The doors hit and slammed like thunder, but bounced back open. "I should've seen the signs!"

Some distracted corner of my mind wondered what signs he could've possibly seen, but I shook the thoughts away. This was my only chance.

"Dad, I'm sorry!"

"We had a deal!"

"I-I know we did, but that was before I—"and Toothless—"oooh, it's all so messed up!" I wailed, digging my hands into my hair.

"So everything in the Ring you've done—a trick? A lie?" He threw his hand back, as if dismissing me, and turned away.

"Look, I screwed up—I should've told you long before now, but Dad—please, you can't hurt him! Blame me, take it out on me, but please, j-just don't hurt Toothless!"

Dad turned back around, looking at me as if he couldn't understand what I was. "The dragon?" he asked. "That's what you're worried about? Not the people you almost killed?"

"H-he was just protecting me! He's family!"

The word rang into a silent room. Dad stared at me, slowly turning red in the face. "Family?" he hissed, sounding more like a dragon than I'd ever heard him. "That-that thing is not your family—I'm your family, Gobber is your family, humans are family—dragons have kill hundreds of us!"

"And we've killed thousands of them! Needlessly!" I yelled back. He reared away for a moment, before shaking his head. Desperate for him to hear this, I continued. "We think we're alone or the ones worst off, with the food shortage and the winter but we're not because they're feeling it too—they never eat anything they take, they're just defending themselves! If they don't go back with something to eat, they're the ones going to get eaten!"

Something in my words made my dad pause and, feeling hope ignite, I kept going. Maybe he'd actually listen! "There's—something else, on their island, Dad, like a monster or—"

"Their island?"

He stepped forward, holding a hand out. "So you've been to the Nest?"

Oh \$hit. "Did I say Nest?" I asked, nervous. Vikings usually had one-track minds—and when the Dragon Nest was mentioned, it took up that one track entirely, no room for anything else.

"How did you find it?" he demanded, coming forward like an entire moving wall.

I stumbled backwards, slightly afraid. "Waiâ€"no, I-I didn't, not really, _Toothless_ didâ€"only a dragon, can find the island."

The sight of him looking up, gears turning in his eyes, looked terrifying enough to give me nightmares. "Ohâ€"no-no, no, Dad, no _please_, it's not what you think! You don't know what you're up against, it's like nothing you've ever _seen_â€""

He walked forward, pushing me out of the way. "Dad, pleaseâ€"" He didn't stop, and the images and sore in my mind of the parasite came forward, creating panic when they mixed with an army of Vikings and my own father. "Dad, I promise you, you can't win this one! No, please, _listen_!"

He kept walking straight to the doors, unhindered. Terror for the last few members of family made my Adam's apple drop. ***F**or once in your life, would you please just _listen_ to me**!"** I screeched, jumping forward to grab at his arm.

Thk!

A huge, meaty fist the size of my entire head connected directly with my singular unbruised cheekbone. I felt my feet leave the floor and my back hit it again, heavy and hard.

The world was black, mostly, and spinning again. I wavered, trying to use my hands to lift myself up.

There was a shred of too-bright light, and a too-dark shadow inside of it, big and bulky. Words drifted into my ears, lazy but audible.

"You _speak_ to them, _worry_ about themâ€"you've thrown your lot in with them. You're not a Viking." I recoiled. "You're not my _son_."

My chest caved in.

The shadow turned around and the amount of light changed with a squeak and a bang. "Ready the ships!" he yelled, his voice almostâ€"almostâ€"breaking. I was jealous, because while some part of him was still holding together, everything I was was shattered and lying on the floor in pieces.

I tried to blink the stars or the tearsâ€"I wasn't sure which they wereâ€"out of my eyes. It didn't really work, but it was enough so that when a thin shape and several thicker ones appeared at the doors, I could see Mildew's creepy, pleased smile.

* * *

><p>In the middle of one of the clearest days Berk had ever seen, thunder rumbled.<p>

The sound made most of those who heard it freeze, grab onto a symbol of MjÃ¶lnir, and mutter for Thor for to forgive them for what Hiccup had done. They held onto those brooches, or pendants, or even belt buckles as they went about preparing for battle.

Gobber, down on the docks, grabbed no pendant when he heard the sound, and instead turned to his oldest friend. Stoick's eyes were suspiciously shiny.

"Stoick," he said, his voice serious and low. "What happened?"

"The boy will be dealt with when we get back."

The blacksmith was sharper than he let most people know€"and he certainly didn't miss the lack of the word son anywhere in that sentence. He glanced to the blue sky. "I don' think he'll be happy about that."

Stoick turned away from his friend. "Or maybe he's not happy because his grandson has turned against the Viking way, spat on everything he stands for. Maybe he's a little angry about that."

The Chief walked away and Gobber sighed. The Night Fury, bound in a long cylindrical trap, was loaded onto the deck.

Gobber watched as the beast struggled against its bonds, bucking and shuddering like an unbroken horse.

And then, for a moment, it paused.

It turned its head up and to the west, the strange flaps on its head quivering. Scaly black lips parted.

That was when they discovered that even with the leather band wrapped tight around its jaw, the Night Fury could still make a soundâ€”a sound that was sad, and desolate, and terrified and worried.

[illegible]

It was a hum and a roar together, and it echoed through the docks and off the water, moving like a ghost through the air. The sound made more people stop than the thunder had, and turn their gaze to the howling, depressed Night Fury on the deck of the flagship.

It opened its mouth again.

__**0000000000__**_â€™"

â€" **00000000000000000000000000000000â€" **

And a second howl joined in.

* * *

><p>Berk had one dungeon with a lot of cells, but any jail cell was very, very rarely used. With the whole dragon problem, we don't really have _time_ to go raid villages and bring back prisoners of war. The only time I'd ever heard of it being occupied was by Alvin the Treacherous, my father's greatest human enemy, 20 years ago. To some, staying in the cell for however long was just step one in becoming declared an Outcast.

I'd never been inside beforeâ€”though I'd certainly looked, curious as I was as a kid. It was a tiny room, barely six by six feet, with a

relatively low ceiling (still high to the shortest teen on Berk) and one wall made entirely of iron bars. There was a bucket, used for the purposes you'd think it was for, a pile of what smelled like moldy straw, and one tiny barred window for air and sunlight. You knowâ€”all the amenities a traitor to the Viking way would need.

Chains and shackles held me to the back wallâ€”the shackles had been too large for my wrists, until they found a few disks of metal with small enough holes drilled into them. They fed my hands through the holes and clamped the shackles behind them, so the things would catch on the disks, unable to slide right off my arms and legs.

But I didn't care about that. I didn't care about the looming fate of being Outcast, even though it was a fate worse than death.

The window, maybe two feet square and heavily barred, faced eastâ€”it had been built that way, so that the prisoners could look upon the might of the Berk fleet and cringe in fear of its awesome power. It was certainly not working for me.

They'd pulled out all twenty-five remaining shipsâ€”the two transport ships weren't fast enough for warâ€”and were loading them full of men, weapons, and shields. Catapults were being hauled down the ramps, and immense battering rams that I knew would hit that parasite like a mosquito.

I didn't see hundreds of men going to war. I didn't see brave warriors readying themselves for battle.

I saw twenty-five more funeral ships readying to take off and burn.

Being an Outcast might be worse than deathâ€”but it's not worse than seeing everyone you love sail to their deaths.

And it doesn't come near the feeling of being able to do absolutely nothing about it.

Do you know what hopelessness feels like? It's like tar, all over your body. In theory, you can still moveâ€”I've moved my entire life, running and twitching and thinking and shiftingâ€”but while your arms and legs can bend, can flex and stretchâ€”nothing gets done. The tar latches on like a leech and won't let go, sucks everything that's you right out and leaves just a shell.

Seeing my entire village go off to their deaths, unable to warn or to stop them, made me limp and empty. I don't think I've ever been this still in my life.

Why bother moving when there's nothing to move forward to?

Toothless called me an optimist, once. Hah.

Why was I like this? Why was I justâ€”unable to do anything? I'd pulled at my chains, but didn't succeed in doing anything except hurting myself. As usual. I stopped a little while ago, and now I was just limp against the wall.

Was it what my dad had said? I winced and turned to the floor as my

heart pulled at the memory. I didn't want to think about that.

Maybe it was the cell, my mind supplied instead. Was this how the dragons in the Kill Ring felt, when they heard the others raiding the island? This hopelessness, this uselessness, ten times stronger than what I'd felt for my entire life? The walls around me soared high over my head but still seemed tiny, crushing me in shadow. Even the thing behind my heart was dull, black like a bottomless pit.

(Later, when I wasn't drowning in my own sorrow, I'd be horrified. How long had the other dragons been living like this? How could _I_ have kept them in there for so long?)

â€|_They're all going to die. And it's my fault._

I sawâ€and heardâ€when they loaded precious cargo onto the flagship. Toothless's black scales and sleek form were unmistakable to me.

"Oh, Toothless," I muttered, chains clanking as I grabbed onto the bars on the window, wishing he could hear me. "I'm so sorry, budâ€|"

Hopeless and helpless, I let my head fall onto the cold iron, closing my eyes tight.

Like a wind spirit, gentle and intangible, a ghost of a sound met my ears. It was ethereal, moving, soft and audible all the way from the flagship's deck.

*****_**H**iiiiiccup**!**_*****

My head snapped up. "Toothless?" I asked, eyes wide. Warmth sparked in my chest.

It wasn't a sound I'd ever heard him make before, but something deep inside me recognized itâ€and the emotion behind it. Instinct told me better than Toothless ever could, that this was another mourning sound; not the grieving howl we'd made for Germdish, but something more. It was a _call_, one a dragon would make if he was lost. If he was missing his aerie with all his heart, and wanted nothing more than to get back to him.

*****_**H**iiiiiiiiccuuuup**!**_*****

That desperation to hear me, to know I was alright, swarmed into and then reflected right off my heart like a shattered mirror. Almost unable to stop myself, and even though I had no idea how to make the sound, my Adam's apple sunk deep into my throat and I pressed my forehead hard against the metal bars, getting as close as possible.

*****_**T**oooooooothleeeeeess**!**_*****

There were tears in my eyes when I ran out of air, and when I took a breath for the next one, we spoke together, the two sounds joining and becoming that much louder.

*****_**C**ouussiiiiiiâ€**!**_*****

"Hey!" _CLAG_

I yelped, cutting off the call, and jumped at the sudden sound, turning around to see a darkened silhouette standing in front of the bars of my cell. The only torch was right behind him and blazing brightly, so I couldn't even make out his face, but by silhouette of wrappings around his head and the fact that he wasn't loading onto the ships, he had to be one of the surviving, but wounded, Vikings from the last search.

"Well now." Mildew's gruff voice made me draw back in fear—it was hard to forget the sight of the end of his staff coming right for my face. "_What_ are we going to do about _that_, d'you think?"

A shiver went down my back, and the thing in my chest went rigid in terror. Instinctively, I scrambled away... and Mildew smiled.

* * *

><p>When the second roar—it could only be Hiccup—it was choked off, Astrid saw and heard Toothless nearly go crazy. It took five Vikings to hold him down _inside the trap_ as they tightened the band around his jaw and clamped a heavy wooden collar around his neck, tying it to the deck.

Worry coursed through her for the both of them—the stealthy dragon with the attitude, and the snarky boy with the quiet bravery.

The whole dragon-training class was standing on the steppe right above the docks, watching the weapons and cargo get loaded. Even though they'd finished their training, after what had happened with Hiccup—who'd _won_, and gotten the chance to kill the Nightmare, but couldn't so much as lift a seaxe to the thing—they were all on probation.

No trip to the Nest for them. Astrid counted themselves lucky. Remembering what had been on that island, she didn't think there would be _any_ survivors this time.

"Uh, what's going to happen to Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked, his voice small but still shattering the silence. "When they get back?"

"They'll probably ship him off, set fire to the boat and let him burn and drown," Tuffnut replied. The thought sent shivers down her back, but Astrid didn't punch him in the face again, because he didn't sound excited like gore usually made him. He sounded—| sad.

"They won't be coming back."

Astrid's voice surprised everyone, even herself. She glanced up and saw the others staring at her. "Hiccup and Toothless took me to the Nest," she admitted.

"They did _what_?" Fishlegs yelped.

"You've _been_ there?" Ruffnut asked.

"What was it like?"

"You knew about this?" Snotlout demanded, cutting them all off with the slightly wounded expression on his face. "You knew—and you didn't tell any of us? I thought we were a team, Astrid!"

For once, he was right—since they'd started on the fire brigade, they'd all been a team. An annoying, frustrating, non-stop-violence-and-blood kind of team, but a team nonetheless; that had changed when they entered the Ring. Dragon-training was a competition, and one she'd been determined to win.

She remembered the first lesson, how she'd dove out of the way and let others take the shots, thinking it was punishment for them being distracted, feeling excited at winning—now all she felt was a curl of shame. She'd left them out for the dragons those entire six weeks, instead of training and helping one another as they had as a fire brigade.

Hiccup had told her, after the first battle with the Nadder, to try and treat everyone as a team. She'd ignored him then, scoffing because she could do better than the others put together. It wasn't until Hiccup's teamwork with Toothless not only beat her, but opened her eyes to the heavens and the marvels in both dragon and boy, that she realized she'd been so very, very wrong.

Astrid had let the dragons' shots hit the others, dancing out of the way, strong but alone. She'd broken the team, and left them all in the dust.

Still, Astrid met his gaze without faltering as Fishlegs shifted side to side. "I found out last night," she explained, pushing all regrets of the past away, to focus on the present. "Came across this—this cove, in the woods that Hiccup had been going to, where he'd been hiding Toothless." There was no need to tell them that she'd tracked him, jealous and furious over her loss in the Ring. "It's a long story, but Hiccup took me for a ride on Toothless—"

"A ride?" Ruffnut repeated, her eyes wide. "You mean—you mean like flying?"

"Duh, didn't you see the saddle on the thing?" Tuffnut scoffed. "What, are you blind now as well as ugly and stupid, too?"

Astrid ignored them as Ruffnut slammed him into the dirt, and kept going. "—and we got sucked into the Nest. There's something in there, the biggest dragon I've ever seen—it lives inside a mountain, takes up the whole thing."

Ruff and Tuff shared an awed look from their spot brawling on the ground. "The whole mountain?"

Astrid nodded. "Hiccup told me that Toothless calls it a parasite—it doesn't get food for itself, it takes over the minds of the other dragons and makes them feed it."

"That must be why they raid," Fishlegs realized as the twins got back to their feet.

Snotlout snorted. "Well that's great, that explains a lot, but our parents are battle-hardened Vikings, remember? They'll be able to

handle it!"

She met his eyes, lips tightening. "It ate an entire Gronkle like a single blueberry, Snotlout. You tell me what a couple ships of men will do to something that big."

Every last one of them paled. "Wait" and Hiccup didn't tell them about this thing?" Fishlegs asked, looking confused.

"He probably did," Astrid said wryly, "but before any of this, before the Ring" would we have listened either?"

Silence. Ruffnut glanced at her brother's nose"still scarred and a little bent"and tightened her jaw. "We need to do something," she decided, stepping forward. "Every dragon has a weakness, right?"

Fishlegs nodded eagerly. "Yeah"Nadders have a big blind spot, and no dragon likes eel, and"

"Yeah, exactly," Ruffnut cut him off, as she always did. Astrid frowned as something nagged in her mind, but she couldn't place it. "We just need to find this thing's, right?"

"How?" Snotlout demanded. "It's not like we can just walk up to it and ask the thing!"

"We can't," Tuffnut said, standing and grinning devilishly, "but maybe Hiccup can."

Ruffnut shared a rare grin with her brother, holding up a fist. The two punched each other's knuckles as hard as they could, Tuff wincing and pulling away.

Astrid shook her head. "Even if he could talk to it, I doubt it'd just tell him the best way to bring it down," she said, making them pause and the twins droop. She frowned, "But maybe he'll have a better plan. C'mon, let's go find him." The teens perked back up immediately and they ran as a group back into the village, beginning their search.

She ignored the quiet nagging at the back of her mind, that she was missing something. First, Hiccup"wherever_ he was"then she could focus on whatever that was.

* * *

><p>Toothless had been looking west when they'd roared at one another, so they started just west of the docks, moving in the same search pattern they used to try and find hotspots during a wide-spread fire.<p>

Fishlegs and Snotlout were on the edges, calling out his name and peeking carefully into houses. They'd already tried asking the few people left on the island where he was, only to get cold glares and why would you want to know?s. No one would help, every door was slammed in their face.

Fish had also already run ahead to try the Chief's house, but had reported it empty"though the second floor, Hiccup's room, had been

crammed _full_ of drawings and sketches of Toothless. He'd brought one back to show themâ€"a charcoal rendering of the Night Fury making a face, obvious care going into the slitted eyes and outstretched tongue.

They'd reached the other side of the island by sundown. Frustrated and ready to give up, the teens had broken for the night and gone to their respective homes to sleepâ€"they still had time, since it would take two days for the ships to get to the island with this wind, but it wasn't a lot.

* * *

><p>Dripâ€| dripâ€| dripâ€|

I watched SÃ³l and Gmot trade places and again in the sky, but just buried my head in my arms and knees. My whole face ached and burned. I'd never felt _burning_ before, not on my head, but it did. The shock from pain had finally, finally worn off. It had only taken several hours. Several eternities. The thing behind my heart had gone cold; turned to black ice the moment Mildew had walked in again, holding that... _thing_.

Liquid spilled off my chin, creating a dark puddle on my clothes and the floor. But even now that I could move again, I didn't care to wipe myself up.

I'd been wrong before. Hopelessness _was_ a tar pit, but what I'd felt at that point was nothing compared to now. The black pit had eaten at me slowly, pulling up and over and now, it was finally over my head. I could barely breathe... but what was the point in breathing anymore, anyway? So much had gone wrong...

There was nothing else left. Even the little spark of hope Toothless's final call had given me was put out.

All that I had left now was the silence of the cell, and the old mantra in my head. A personal Walk of Shame, if you willâ€"fitting, since I hadn't gotten a public one for _this_ particular debacle. Guess my subconscious still needed its fix of names, even if they came from my own head. And with every word it spat out, the tar got stickier and dragged me down lower and lower, trapping me better with every second and erasing every memory of sunlight.

Worthless, Loki's child, cursed, hiccup, runt, scrawny, mistakeâ€|

Useless.

* * *

><p>Astrid slept fitfully for maybe an hour. She woke up to nightmares she couldn't remember, and went to walk in the woods. Gmot was high and bright, and she had Reginlief, but she still kept an eye out for bears or wolves.<p>

This time, when she saw a huge carving through the soil and the broken trees, she didn't blow it off as the random act of some godâ€"the bolas not too far away made her imagine a sleek black dragon coming down to earth, hard and uncontrolled, but about to be

released by thin hands. And when she saw foot-shaped pits in deep ruts, she realized that wasn't any flightless dragonâ€”that was Hiccup, running like he had in the Ring. The slices in the earthâ€”the successful invention, the caring bravery of mercy, and yet another secretâ€”were more layers underneath the skin of the missing boy.

All of that she saw on her way to the cove, her last solid bet. It was sunrise by the time she found the place, but it was abandoned.

Disgusted at the waste of time and energy, she turned around and headed back to the village.

The group was in the main square, as they'd all promised to be when SÃ³l poked her head from the eastern sea. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were sleeping standing up, propped up on one another, and Snotlout was yawning.

"Bad night?" Astrid asked, swinging Reginlief idly and pretending she'd actually slept at all.

Snotlout glared. Any hints of flirting were gone with the chance of rest. "My dad's on that flagship, and my uncle is leading them to their doom, and my cousin is missing. Yeah, I had a brilliant night, thanks for asking. You look like you got a nice and comfortable one too."

"Don't be sarcastic, that's Hiccup's job," Fishlegs muttered, crossing his arms. There were dark circles underneath his eyes. "Do we have _any_ idea where to look anymore?"

Unable to lie, Astrid shook her head. "I don't know. I even checked their cove, just nowâ€”nothing. If he's not thereâ€”"

Click. Click. Click.

The sound made them all pause and turn around. Using her magically charmed staff, Elder Gothi was hobbling up to them, her entire little body trembling.

"Elder Gothi!" Fishlegs yelped, bumping into the twins and waking them up as they hit the ground. "Sh-should you be out this early, ma'am?"

"Do you need any help?" Astrid asked, holding a hand out.

The old woman shook her head, and took one of her hands off her staff. It was trembling in the air, but then she closed it into a fist and _shook_ it.

The teens blinked at the expression of hatred and anger crossing the miniscule woman's face. She wasn't shaking in exertion or coldâ€”she was _furious_, and the rage was struggling to keep contained in such a frail body.

"Elder Gothi? What happened?" Snotlout asked. Even he was respectful to the oldest of the village.

She took her staff and stabbed it into the ground as hard as she

could, scratching symbols into the dirt. The first was the rough shape of a helmetâ€”with nice and thick, simply-turned, pointed bullhorns, large enough for her to draw the Berk crest on the helm.

"That's Hiccup's helmet!" Ruff realized, pointing.

Hope flared like Nadder fire in Astrid's chest. "Do you know where Hiccup is?"

Elder Gothi scowled darkly, and made another drawing. This one was a box, with lines going up and down through it.

"What is that?" Tuffnut asked, tilting his head. "Planks of wood? Is he in a house?"

"No you idiot, it's a boat from above, those are the oarsâ€”he's on a ship!"

"It looks likeâ€”| bars," Fishlegs said. Gothi pointed to him sharply, and he jumped.

She went back to the dirt. She redrew the box, but this time on top of the helmet symbol.

"Hiccup's behind bars?" Fishlegs concluded, and then they all froze.

"No," Snotlout muttered, taking a step back, anger already reddening his face. "No, no wayâ€”|"

Gothi's fury was contagiousâ€”it roared into a wildfire in Astrid's heart and she ran for Berk's dungeons.

* * *

><p>Another cliffy... sorry folks! ;)
*</p>

Until next time, my lovelies!

PEACE,

~Tibki

20. Chapter 20

Hey y'all,

TAKE A STEP BACK. TWO MIGHT BE UPLOADED TODAY, SO THIS IS CHAPTER 20 AND NOT 19.

GO BACK A CHAPTER IF YOU HAVEN'T READ HICCUP AND STOICK'S SCENE TOGETHER YET.

**So, here's chapter twenty. For some reason, Chapter 19 wasn't showing up on the story in my profile, so I'm re-uploading both of these puppies today. :)

>

I feel obliged to inform you-I'm moving in to my dorm today, and classes start next week. I have no idea how well I'm going to juggle everything, but I have like two chapters ahead of this one ready to be posted just in case. Please don't shoot me or hold me against my word if I have to slow down-I swear to God I will catch up eventually, if only on the weekend.

****Anyway, my lovelies, here's your second chapter!****

****Oh, by the way. GORE AHEAD. GORE AHEAD.

>**

****DISCLAIMED.****

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY</p>

Berk's singular dungeon was used to house future Outcasts. Never, never had it ever held the son of a Chief—and angry or not, if Chief Stoick had ordered Hiccup to be put in there, Astrid would eat her skirt, spikes and all. The blood-boiling and unforgettable image of a bitter, old, disgusting excuse for a human being viciously slamming his staff into Hiccup's temple came to mind, and she knew, just knew, it had to have been Mildew.

The cells were for Outcasts—monsters that they no longer considered human—and despite knowing that Hiccup was technically only three-quarters human anyway, the real monsters were the guards whose shoulder-blades she felt no compunction against slamming the butt of her axe between.

Snotlout was right behind, spitting mad at the insult to his family, taking his hammer to the few heads that hadn't hit the ground immediately after her initial bludgeon.

The dungeon's main corridor was carved deep into the steppe, tunnels held up by rocks and beams of wood. Torches were set into brackets every eight or ten feet, and Astrid knew they were in the right place immediately.

"Whoa, who doused that one in whale oil?" Ruffnut asked, wincing and trying not to look directly at the hugely burning torch in front of the cell.

"It'll go out soon—we need to get another one," Fishlegs worried.

"No, it's fine." Astrid held a hand up and walked towards the bars of the cell nearest the blazing torch. Even with that thing, it was dim inside—the growing light of Sól came through the window, but was angled to the left, leaving the far right corner almost completely black. "He's in here. Hiccup?"

There was a slight shift—maybe a chink of something metal—but even without a verbal reply, she could tell. "Someone get the keys!" she barked, and the twins scrambled away, back to the fallen guards. Astrid turned back to the cell and grabbed onto the bars. "Don't worry, Hiccup, we're getting you out of there."

No reply.

"I can't believe they put you in here," Snotlout snarled, furious. "Don't worry, cousin, we've got you covered."

Another quiet shift. Nothing else.

"Hiccup? Are you awake in there?" Astrid started getting worriedâ€”the normal sarcastic Hiccup would never have been so quiet. And she would've thought he'd be right up against the bars, railing to get out and to Toothless. "Hiccup, can you hear me?"

Still nothing. She glanced aroundâ€”Fishlegs and Snotlout looked confused too, if a little less concerned. "Hiccup, what happened? Why aren't youâ€”why aren't you trying to get out? Toothless is out there_, they're going for the island! You saw how big that thing was, they'll all die!"

Her last word echoed in the cell, but there was still only silence. "Your father!" she continued, her own mother on that flagship coming to mind and making her voice nearly break. "Your tribeâ€”your best friend_! If you don't do anything, they're lost!"

Now there was somethingâ€”no words, barely any soundâ€”just heavy breathing.

With her worries soothed a little even by that much, anger flared in its place. She clenched her jaw and slammed a fist against the bars. "Why aren't you angry?" she shouted, making the others behind her jump. "Your cousin was just stolen from you! Your entire earthly family is sailing to their deaths! Why aren't you angry? Why aren't you doing anything?"

"Hey, I haven't gone anywhere," Snotlout cut in, crossing his arms. "The only thing that's gotten stolen from him is that stupid, brainless beast he calls a petâ€”"

"_NNNNNN_â€”!"

A shape just appeared right in front of the bars, making them all jump and scream in terrorâ€”and then again in horror.

Gruesome was the only word for Hiccup's face when it came into the light, inches away from Snotlout's side of the cell wall. Black and blue bruises smeared darkness around both of his glinting, angry eyesâ€”the fresh and bleeding bruise on his right eye went across his entire temple. Parts of his cheeks and nose were sliced open, crusty with old blood, and dripping new, and his eyes were screwed up with the sheer fury boiling from them.

But that wasn't the worst part.

The worst was, by far, the blood that dribbled from dots across his upper and lower lips. The worst was the lines of leather that strapped the bloodless flesh together, dyed crimson with lifeblood, tied off at either corner of his mouth.

Hiccup, the sarcastic, defenseless little hiccup of the village, had had his lips sewn shut.

Snotlout turned snow-white, and Fishlegs threw up.

"Oh my gods," Fishlegs squeaked, eyes crunched shut, facing the floor. Snotlout was making an odd sound that Astrid was too-shocked, horrified, completely unprepared-to describe. "Oh my _gods_."

"Oh Thor," Astrid whispered, her hands covering her mouth. Hiccup's furious eyes slid away from his human cousin and landed on her.

She was used to them lighting up, just a little, whenever those green eyes saw her. She liked being able to bring that out of him, when she never saw that light elsewhere. Now, though, when their eyes met, his didn't brighten. They dimmed instead, the glint of anger disappeared from them, leaving them dull and dead, and his shoulders slumped.

Chinks filled the air, and the three horrified gazes went to his wrists and feet. Hiccup was _shackled_—their tribe didn't _use_ shackles, because they were strong and fast enough to keep any escapees down and captured. The only times they used the things were for the most dangerous of prisoners, mad thralls, and rabid, vicious beasts too dangerous to let live.

Sarcastic little Hiccup lifted his left hand and the chains clinked together. He made a fist, held it like he wanted to do something, but then let it drop. He looked away from the door and to the window.

"Ruffnut! Tuffnut!" Fishlegs screamed down the hall. "_Hurry_!"

"Forget _hurry_!" Snotlout snarled, furious and animalistic. He picked up his hammer and swung it hard, slamming it into the wooden frame of the door.

Astrid, Fishlegs, _and_ Hiccup jumped at the sound of splintering wood, but another good and hard hit to the corner of the door made it crack completely. Snotlout tossed his hammer away before grabbing at the beams and pulling.

He couldn't get it all the way off but, frowning in determination, Fishlegs stepped forward. The larger boy grabbed the other side and, with one big pull, yanked it off completely.

Right then, Ruff and Tuff appeared. "Whoa!" she said, staring at Fish as he threw the door to the side.

"What did you need _these_ for, then?" Tuff demanded, holding up the keys. "Where's Hiccup's _holy_ Helheim!"

Astrid snatched the ring of keys out of his fingers and ran in, letting Reginlief hit the floor. Hiccup sighed and sank down next to it, stretching his feet out but looking forlorn.

She knelt at his feet and reached out, then stopped. Her eyes were glued onto the monstrous stitches of leather across his lips, and she felt her stomach turn.

He'd only ever had his words in the first place. Now—

Astrid shook her head. Dam^it, she was a warriorâ€"Hel, she was a _woman_. She could handle some blood. There were more important things; she could kill whoever was cowardly enough to do such a thing later. The tribe came first. _Hiccup_ came first.

Astrid knelt and undid the shackles, pulling off the disks that were keeping them from falling off his skinnyâ€"

The sight of red skin and blisters made her hiss and look up apologetically. "You _did_ fight, didn't you?"

Hiccup didn't say anythingâ€"couldn't, and the thought made bile rise in her throat. He sat limply as Astrid took a deep breath freed his wrists too, also finding bleeding blisters around them. He massaged the skin, and when he rubbed at the wrong points, he winced on instinct and pulled at the stitchesâ€"more blood dripped, and he moved his hands to his face.

{She could see tear tracks in the blood crusted onto his cheeks.}

"W-we've got toâ€" to get them out," Fishlegs said, sounding weak.

"Gods, Hiccup," Snotlout said, voice tight. Hiccup glanced at him, but then moved his gaze back to Astrid.

His eyes were green, flat, and dull. He had lost all hope. Somehow, Astrid couldn't blame him.

But that didn't _excuse_ _him_, either. Fishlegs was right. They had to get the stitches out.

Tuffnut stepped forward, of all people. Hiccup flinched, but then met his eyes. He pulled a small seaxe from his belt, and looked at the smallest of them seriously. "Figure this is gonna hurt worse'n my nose did, Squirt," he said, sounding uncharacteristically sober.

Hiccup blinked at himâ€"and then his eyes grew wide in shock.

"Nnnnn!" he screamed, scrambling backwards, away from the blade. "Nnnnn!" Tuffnut frowned and stepped forward and Hiccup threw himself back. Ruffnut, thank the gods, grabbed her brother's shoulder. "Nnnnnn!"

"I don't think he wants you to try that," she said.

Astrid walked forward and knelt again by his side. "Hiccup, they need to come out," she said gently. A kind of mania entered his eyes, and he squirmed backwards. She heard a drawn-out whine erupt from his chestâ€"it was impossible to tell if it was human or Dragonese. "Hiccup!"

"Listen here," Snotlout said, taking a step forward himself. Hiccup flinched away, and Astrid saw Snotlout actually _hesitate_ before continuing. "If we don't cut those things out, you won't be able to tell us your plan."

Hiccup looked at him as if he's sprouted antlers, making a questioning sound. "Yeah, a plan," he repeated, as if he were slow. "You know, to keep everyone we know from dying?"

The mangled face fell, hopelessness returning in his eyes, and he slumped down onto the moldy straw bed. Astrid frowned at the dejection. "Your father and Toothless are with them, Hiccup. And last night, you said you wouldn't let anything happen to him." She put a hand on his shoulder, and subconsciously noticed that he didn't flinch from her. "You lie about a lot of things, but I know that was the truth."

He obviously had a reply, but whatever it would've been was held back. Hiccup met her eyes and shook his head. The green orbs still didn't light up, the way she liked them to, and she ground her teeth. Dam#it, of course he was going to be difficult. "This'd be a lot easier is we could talk," she muttered, angry. Hiccup turned his face away. Thinking hard, she said, "Gothi doesn't talk eitherâ€"you're good at drawing, can you communicate like that?"

Hiccup looked about as encouraged as the others by that. Ruffnut actually snorted, and Astrid kicked her in the shin. "If you've got a better ideaâ€"!"

"Hiccup? What're you looking at?"

* * *

><p>I barely heard Fishlegs's questionâ€"my attention was completely and solely focused on the double-bladed axe by my side.<p>

Something about itâ€" My chest tightened and almost rumbled, the thing inside of it urging me forward. For the first time since Mildew had held up that curved needle, it wasn't terrified and cold and oozing black slime behind my heart.

Following it instinctively, I reached out and grabbed the handle, having to use both hands to lift its weight. But when I had both hands around it, the thing in my chest cracked open. It wasn't a lot, even less than it had even when I'd been injured in the Ring, but a trickle of warmth still flowed through.

I could feel it fill the axe, and a corner of my lips twitched, new blood flowing as the leather rubbed against the insideâ€"I barely felt the pain, next to what it had been last night.

This would be how I spoke with them, I knew it. I looked up to the top of the cell, imagining the sky beyond it.

Thanks, Grandpa.

"Hiccup? What're you doing with my axe?" Astrid asked, bringing my thoughts back to Midgard.

"Aaand why're you looking at the ceiling?" Snotlout wondered, glancing up to see a simple layer of moldy stones and roots.

I just shook my head and held the blade out to Astrid. Confused but willing to trust me, she grabbed a part of the handle just underneath the head of the axe.

Then she hissed and pulled back, shaking her hand. "Ow!" she yelped. "That's hot! â€|That's _hot_."

Her words didn't make a shred of sense to me, but _something_ must've registered, because her eyes widened. "Willâ€|whatever you're doingâ€|will it work if I wear something over my hand?"

I shrugged, because I didn't have a single clue. I put down Reginlief for a moment, not daring to let go entirely and used my other hand to tear at the seams of my half-ruined sleeve until it came right offâ€|it was an old shirt, and had gone through Hel alongside me today. I handed the strip to her.

The others were looking at us oddly as I hefted the axe back up, focusing on putting more warmth in, strengthening the connection. Astrid wrapped the scrap of my shirt around the place where she'd tried to grab, and then curled her fingers around it.

I felt the warmth seep into her fingers, stopping there, and screwed my eyes up, focusing.

**Astrid, can you hear me?**

She leapt back, eyes wide. "Great Thor on Helgafjell!" she yelped and I smiled as much as I could. It worked! "I _heard_ you! How in Hel's nameâ€|?"

"You _heard_ him? What, like he was in your _head_?"

"_Ew_!"

"How is that possible?" Fishlegs asked, eyes wide.

"How in Hel's name is _any_ of what he's been doing possible?" Ruffnut pointed out. "Talking to dragons, running that fastâ€| We shouldn't ask, or the gods might take it away!"

I shook my head. They wouldn't do thatâ€|hate me they did, but want me dead, which I definitely would be without my Gifts? If they wanted me in one of their Realms so bad, I'd've been already gone a hundred times over.

Instead, I stood, grunting as I put the weight of the axe on my good shoulder, spun it, and pointed at the carving I'd made myself on the handle.

"Reginlief," Fishlegs read. "Daughter ofâ€|of the _gods_?" Awe entered his eyes and he spun to Astrid. "Astrid, are _you_â€|?"

"No!" she yelped, holding out her arms. "Of course I'm not! My parents are both on those boats, same as yours!"

"But that means _Hiccup_ isâ€| and he'sâ€|wellâ€|_Hiccup_!" Snotlout exclaimed. I flinched, the old fear of someone _finding out_ making thrills up and down my spine. Astrid must've seen it, because her jaw

clenched.

"Lookâ€”how he's able to do this stuff, it's not as simple as that, but it _does_ have something to do with the gods. And right now, we just need to be thankful that they're on our side enough to _let_ him do it."

"That's what I said!" Ruffnut agreed, nodding.

"Ooooh, I wanna try!" Before I could react, Tuff grabbed the covered part of the handle and I felt the warmth go into his hand. It feltâ€”| _wrong_, with Tuffnut, but it didn't _not_ work, soâ€”|

**Tuffnut, please give the axe back to Astrid.**

"Whoa!" Tuff said, eyes growing huge. "I heard him! His mouth didn't move, well, obviously, but that nasally voice came through loud and clear! In my _head_"

**I don't sound ****nasally****!** I protested, then hesitated. _**Well, okay maybe a little butâ€”not the point! Tuff, **__**give Astrid the axe!**_

"Okay, okay, sheesh. Astrid, Mr. Bossy wants to talk with you."

Astrid kicked him to the side with an annoyed glare. "How about you and the others go wait outside for a bit?" she saidâ€”not asked, said. Or, growled. Growled was more appropriate.

"But Astrid!" Snotlout whined, and when she turned her glare on him, he froze and fear entered his eyes. He grabbed at Fishlegs's arm, leading him away from the cell, down the hall. "Uhâ€”| c'mon man, let's let 'em talk."

"Aw, I wanted to watch them mind-speak!" Tuffnut complained, and Ruffnut, glancing between the two of us, rolled her eyes before dragging him out of there.

* * *

><p>Once it was quiet, Astrid wrapped her hand around Reginlief's handle, sitting cross-legged in front of me. "Hiccup," she said, looking at me with eyebrows angled seriously, "do you have a plan?"

I shook my head. _**No.**_ She stared at me, face blank. It still looked like an accusation to me, and I scowled. _**What do you want me to do, huh? Justâ€”just blink and come up with an answer, just like that? For fu(k's sake, look at me!**_ She winced, and my jaw set, both hurt and validated._** It's hopeless!**_

Astrid returned my scowl with one of her own, easily a hundred times scarier. "So you're just giving up? Just like that?"

I stared at her, incredulous. _Give up_? Like I hadn't already triedâ€”like it hadn't ended in a disaster in the Kill Ring, hadn't ended in my family and aerie being shipped off to-toâ€”|

**Did you not hear me?** I begged, banishing the thought. **There's

nothing I can do!**_** I'm trapped in here, muted and bound andâ€"dam#it, Astrid!**_ Frustrated and helpless, I shook my head and looked away.

"No, you dam#it, Hiccup!" she snapped, angry and unwilling to listen. Story of my life. She twisted her head to force me to look her in the eye. "For the gods' sake! Don't talk like you can't do anything when you haven't even tried! You're the grandson ofâ€" "

**Don't finish that sentence,** I snapped, eyes narrowing. Her mouth snapped shut, surprised. _**You thought I was worthless too, before you knew about thatâ€"but a title changes nothing. My Gifts change **_**nothing**_**. I can't run o-or burn my way out of this. I'm still stuck here. I still c-can'tâ€| and Toothless, a-and Dadâ€|**_

Even mentally, my voice cracked. The idea of what would happen to my family, of my being unable to stopâ€| _it_â€| from happeningâ€| it opened a black spiral in my chest and had I not been muzzled, I think I might've wailed. As it was, a Dragonese whimper, muted by sewn lips but still clear enough to hear, rang from my chest. I curled up into my usual position, using my free hand to duck my head into my knees.

**They were right the whole time,** I thought, my inner voice quiet and broken with the truth now weighing on my shoulders. _**I really am useless. Hiccup the Useless.**_

I was not going to cry. I was _not_. Taking a slow, ragged breath through my nose made sure of thatâ€"that, and experience, from hearing those same words from other mouths. I'd never really believed it, thoughâ€| not until the proof was slapping me in the face.

Dad and Toothless and the entire village were sailing to their deaths. I'd never see any of them again.

I was useless.

{Over their lives, Astrid had heard plenty of sarcasm from the boy in front of herâ€"but never this kind of true _despair_. Her heart squeezed in her chest like it hadn't before, not since her parents mistakenly told her that Erik had died in that forge fire.}

{She didn't like it. But she was a Vikingâ€"what she didn't like, she didn't put up with. So she decided to change it.}

Astrid shifted where she sat, but I didn't notice or care, too busy drowning in the black pit my mind had become. And then she spoke.

"I never thought you were useless. Not once."

My eyes opened, facing the floor, in pure shock. I glanced up and saw Astrid looking resolutely at the wall. She didn't add anything past that, butâ€| I guess she didn't really need to.

She never thought I was useless? Someoneâ€"_she_â€"hadn'tâ€| this _whole time_? And I just didn't _know_?

"I get why you're thinking that now, though. You must be feeling pretty \$hitty," she added, cutting into my amazed thoughts. "I

meanâ€"you've lost _everything_. You're beaten, helpless, you've lost your father, your tribe, your best friendâ€"|"

The shock fizzled out of me, replaced by a much more familiar sense of sarcasm. _**Thank you, for summing that up,**_ I snarked, leveling a flat gaze at her.

For some reason, that made her smile. I sighed through my nose and shook my head, the black pit of hopelessness returning returning for just a second. I looked out the small window I'd last seen my cousin through, and my eyebrows met high on my forehead.

**Why couldn't I have just killed him in the woods? It would've been better, for everyone,** I wondered to myself, hating myself for the thought even as it came. Nothing would ever make me regret those wonderful summer days in the cove. But this was coming very, very close.

If I'd killed him quickly, out there, Toothless wouldn't be on his way to dying slow, unable to escape; my dad wouldn't be leading the entire village to a fiery, fanged death. I wouldn't've gotten convinced I was actually worth something, only to be proven so terribly wrong.

"That's a good question," Astrid replied, turning to follow my gaze west. "The rest of us would've done it. Why didn't you?"

**I dunno,** I said, not wanting to think about it. The mere thought made guilt pour through meâ€"this was all my fault.

"That's not an answer."

Annoyance flared. Why wouldn't she just leave itâ€"_me_â€"alone? _**Why does this matter? It's _**hopeless**_, remember?*_ She glared at me and I scowled, but answered. _**Fine! You wanna hear it? I was a coward! I was weak! I was my usual stupid hiccup selfâ€"first Viking in 300 years to not kill a dragon, that definitely fits the billâ€"why do you _**care**_?*_

Maybe she didn't think I was useless like the others did, all that time, but she also didn't do anything to show it. She left me alone, like everyone else. Why wasn't she doing it _now_, the first time I _wanted_ her to?

But something echoed through my grip on the axeâ€"maybe a return emotion from Astrid, faded with her not knowing how to use the connection. She didn't say anything, only glared at me, but I could kinda feel it.

_I've _always_ cared._

And maybe, with every nod she'd ever given me and the lack of scorn, she actually _had_ shown itâ€" in her own, Viking-to-the-extreme way.

She didn't think I was useless. All these years.

"First not to kill a dragonâ€" but first to _ride_ one," she pointed out. I froze, remembering Toothless's own words on the subjectâ€"and how our first real flight had felt. How we'd done it, just the two of

usâ€"managed the impossible and conquered the sky, bringing a grounded kid and a downed dragon into the air. It seemed like ages ago.

"Soâ€"?"

I sighed and swallowed, closing my eyes and remembering wide toxic eyes and a narrow set of pupils. The emotion and fear in their depths. `_**I guessâ€" he looked as scared as I was. I looked at him, and I saw myself.**_`

Astrid nodded, looking thoughtful. "He's probably pretty scared now," she said. "I meanâ€"he looked terrified, when they, uhâ€" She glanced at my lips and I closed my eyes.

`_**Finally shut me up?**_`

She pursed her lips, disapproving. I opened my eyes and glanced at her sideways. `_**He'dâ€" **_**everyone'd **_**â€"be better off if Dad had thrown me off a cliff when I was born.**_`

A second of silence.

Then, a fistâ€"small, bony, and hardâ€"slammed directly into my arm. I yelped, and then squeezed my eyes tight when it pulled at the stitches. When the pain lessenedâ€"slowly, of course, but eventuallyâ€"I looked up and glared at Astrid, who was glaring at me furiously. I shrank back, wondering why I wasn't bursting into flames like her eyes were trying to manage.

"That was for thinking so low of yourself, you big idiot," she growled. And then her faceâ€"softened?

I was shocked still when she moved forward and grabbed my chin with her free hand, careful of the wounds I knew were scattered all over. Astrid looked me directly in the eye, meeting and trapping my gaze.

Her eyes skittered across my bruised and sliced cheeks, before she instead pressed her lips to my forehead. Every muscle in my body went rigid, then inexplicably relaxed.

Astrid leaned back and rested her forehead on mine, looking me in the eye again. "And that," she added, "was for fixing me."

I blinked at her, confused. Fixed her? How? She wasâ€"she was perfect, though. How could I have `_fixed_` what didn't need fixing?

"You fixed me," she repeated nonetheless. "And you fixed Toothless. But if you want to fix `_this_`," she said, waving broadly before jabbing a finger into my chest, "you've got to fix yourself first."

"Not physically," she cut in, before I could think a word. "Yes, you're weak. Yes, you can't lift a hammer, or throw an axe, or even fling a pair of bolas. But we `_don't_` need that right now." Astrid glared at me. "What we need right now is that annoyingly pig-headed little `_fishbone_` who doesn't know when to quit."

"Last night, you did quit. To be honest, I can't blame youâ€"you were stuck in a dark place, you were muted, you were helpless. Fine. I'd be bummed out too. But you're not anymore._"

She moved back and pointed to the destroyed cell door, the bars my friends and cousin had ripped off. "You're free, Hiccup," she said seriously, "and your cousin is surrounded by Vikings and going back to that monster. Fix yourself, because the Hiccup who helped a downed dragon fly, who showed me the heavens, wouldn't leave his cousin scared like this."

At that sentence, I was thrown back in time, remembering how he'd reacted to coming to Berk, that night when we'd gotten stuckâ€"the fear he felt when he returned to her thrall alone for the first time, even if it had only been for a few minutes. No doubt he was terrified, now.

The image of Toothless, as afraid as he'd beenâ€"thank our sire you came_â€"rang through my mind and made my shoulders tense. I'd hated seeing him like thatâ€"and the gods knew, I didn't want it to ever happen again.

Astrid was right. I had to do something. I was free nowâ€"nothing was holding me back.

"â€|So? What're you gonna do about it?" Astrid asked, prompting me.

Knowing my track record? I huffed. **Honestly? Probably something stupid.**_

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "Good. But you already did that."

Couldn't deny that one. Taking a breath, I frowned, thinking. I had to stop them from reaching the islandâ€"or convince them not to go.

If I could get to Toothless, or my dad, before they landed, I'd have a better chance of explaining what was on that island, of stopping them before everyone killedâ€"it would be a little hard for him to ignore me if I was sitting dragonback and roaring at him.

Except they left yesterday afternoon. With the fair skies and friendly winds Berk had been having all week, they were probably most of the way there by now, and they took basically every workable ship on Berk.

I closed my eyes and laid everything out like I would on my worktable, taking a mental step back. Toothless and Dad were across a huge expanse of water, maybe already on the island. We needed a way of getting to the island, over the water, without boats.

What about last time? We got to the island the last time byâ€"_

My eyes snapped open. Had they been able to move very much without searing pain, my lips would've spread into a grin. Even with it, the corners twitched.

I shot to my feet, dragging Astrid with me, who was beginning to

smile. Plans formulated in my mind, and the mental image of my father, of my cousin, and of that monster parasite made it all fall into place faster.

"**Then how about something crazy?**" I asked, eyes brightening.

She sighed dramatically, but her smile blossomed. "What do you have in mind?"

"Waitâ€"he's got a plan? Already?"

We both looked off to the side, and saw Snotlout punching Tuffnut. "You idiot, they heard you!" Almost immediately, I turned redâ€"how much had they heard? Astrid, however, only tilted her chin up, proud and graceful as always.

Tuffnut didn't take Snotlout's anger too seriously. "Wow, he just closed his eyes and poof!" Tuff said, waving his arms.

"Yeah, it's called _thinking_, " Ruff explained. "You should try it sometime."

I shook my head and ran my plan through my head again, picking up necessary bits and pieces as it refined itself. Tuning out their argument, I hopped onto one foot, struggling to keep my balance as I ripped what was left of my right boot off with my one free hand. When I looked back up, the others were staring at me as if I were crazy, but I ignored that, thinking to Astrid as I turned to the other boot.

"**Okay, I'm gonna need maybe four chickens, and two buckets of yak milk, and some goatweed.**" I remembered how pissed off the Nightmare had been, _**Maybe lots and lots of goatweed. I'll be in the Ring, get it as fast as you possibly can.**_

Astrid's eyebrows shot upâ€"a shopping list must not have been what she was expecting. "And what in Hel's name are we going to do with four chickens, two buckets of yak milk, and a ton of goatweed?"

"Have dinner?" Snotlout asked, frowning.

"Only if you want to _die_, goatweed's poisonous!" Fishlegs yelped.

"**You'll see!**"

Without another word, I winked, let go of the axe, and took off.

* * *

><p>In the same second Hiccup let go of the axe, he spun on his heel and was goneâ€"nothing but an impossibly fast blur and a blast of wind down the hall.<p>

Fishlegs, Snotlout, and the twins gaped as the torches, thrown sideways by the wind and made huge by his passing, returned to normal. Astrid smiled and crossed her arms. "Now _that's_ more like it."

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it!

****Until tomorrow, my lovelies!****

****PEACE,****

****~Tibki****

21. Chapter 21

****Hey y'all!****

****Glad you liked last chapter! ;) I'm not entirely happy with this one, but to make up for any lack in quality, it's longer than usual. Hope that makes it a little better...****

****Kudos to all of you who picked up on my symbolism last chapter! Hiccup stuck in a dark place, no matter how much he fights, and caught without a voice anyone would listen to... sounds kinda like the start of the movie, doesn't it? Also-Loki suffered a similar punishment, once upon a time. That's important to know for future chapters.****

****Hope you like it!****

****DISCLAIMED.****

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE_

My lips hurt like there was poison from Loki's infamous punishment dripping onto them, but Astrid was right: my cousin was scared, and my dad was in danger. Maybe I was still muted, but they'd gotten me out of that cage—now that I was free, there was nothing really holding me back. Astrid had shown me that. Her starlight had burned off that tar.

The shackles were gone, and like _Hel_ was I going to let something as small as a couple stitches stop me from keeping my aerie safe.

After giving Astrid my Dragon Training Grocery List, I took off and shot over to the Kill Ring. I had work to do.

Unsurprisingly, the arena had been left completely untouched since yesterday afternoon. With the focus on either packing up for war, or throwing me in the dungeon and—keeping me shut up—no one had cared enough to clean up the mess that was on the floor.

There was absolutely _no_ way the dragons would want anything to do with me if there were weapons in the Ring when I brought them out—not even Slither and Tricky. There was broken wood and scraps of metal, and shattered as well as whole weapons lying around, and the main door was black with soot too.

Well, this is gonna be fun.

Step one was getting past the grate—the burnt door had been held open for us to leave, but the grate leading into the tunnel was closed. For everyone not the size of Gobber or my father, there was a lever, but even that would be difficult to use for a fishbone like me.

Thinking quick, I narrowed my eyes. I needed to pull the thing—ah ha!

The trip to the forge and back to pick up a coil of rope would've taken a half a second, but I stopped twice. The first time, I braked in front of Fishlegs, scaring half of the goatweed out of his arms.

Giving him an apologetic look, I picked up a stem, careful not to smell it myself, and rolled it between my fingers. The oil—poisonous if ingested by people but, I'd found out, exactly what about the weed made dragons so calm—grew thick on the pad of my thumb. I walked up and put the strand on top of the remaining pile in his arms, showing him a thumbs up and getting a weak smile before I took off again.

The second time, I ran into Snotlout, who was grumbling, predictably, about having to do women's work—I would've paid dearly to see him say that to Astrid or Ruffnut, or just any of the women in the village, really—so I didn't really feel too bad just appearing right in front of him.

He screamed—girlishly, I might add—and dropped the two buckets of yak milk he'd been carrying. One of them landed awkwardly, spilling much more than the other. My human cousin watched with wide eyes as I picked up the emptier bucket and sniffed.

I gagged—whatever that yak had been eating, it wasn't grass. Shaking my head, I put the bucket aside. Snotlout looked insulted and like he was about to say something, but I just picked up the other one and sniffed it too.

Much better. I nodded and pointed to the bucket, happy that it was the fuller one. Snotlout scowled.

"What do you mean, only that one? I spent like forever on that bucket!" I shrugged, tapped my nose. "Your sense of smell's probably as useful as you are! The other bucket's fine, look, watch!"

My human cousin picked up the bad bucket and tipped it into his mouth before I could stop him. I cringed as the taste hit him, and his cheeks puffed out as his stomach rejected what he was attempting to swallow.

He tossed the bucket aside and spat the bad milk out, doubling over. Carefully, I patted his back gently before getting out of dodge. I did not want to see if he threw up.

Once I had the rope back at the Ring, I tied one end to the lever and the other around my waist. Carefully choosing the direction, I took off.

The lever was pulled right down and the grate sprung up.

Grinning in success, I freed myself and zipped down into the Ring to start clearing it out.

* * *

><p>Semi-semi-divine speed or not, it took me a good twenty minutes to clear the Ring of all the debris Toothless and the Nightmare had left. Astrid and Snotlout actually arrived before I finished, and helped (or in Snotlout's case, watched) with the final touches, putting three raw chickens and both pails of yak milk off to the side. Astrid had also brought me a bucket of water and a cloth, which I used to wipe the worst of the blood off my face and neck, and then kept safely in my coat.<p>

(My reflection in the water was gruesome, and to this day I don't like thinking about it, but it felt good removing the sticky grime left by prejudice.)

Once the floor was clean, I went over to check what they'd brought. "Ruff and Tuff are preparing the last one," Astrid told me as I poked at the plucked bodies, content with their size. They weren't the biggest, but the Nadder would probably have taken eggs at that point. I gave her a thumbs-up before turning to Snotlout's milk.

A quick sniff of both and I gave him a thumbs-up too. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. If I had to go all the way back up there again, I would've made you drink it!"

I sighed and went back to the chickens, picking them up by the feet and walking past the two of them to the Nadder's door. I'd already decided to free her first, because she'd be able to help me outâ€"after all, a Nadder's fire burns hottest of all the dragons.

Motioning for the others to get back, I propped the door open just enough to throw the three birds in, and then closed it quickly.

"What was that about?" Astrid asked, looking confused but intriguedâ€"not like she was wondering if I'd been hit across the head too hard, like Snotlout was. Unable to answer, I pointed to the door, then to my stomach, tapping it. "How did you know it was hungry?"

Because she always was. Because the keepers had a bad habit of not feeding her. But that I wasn't able to say without words, so I shrugged.

At that point, Fishlegs and the twins arrived. He threw his armload of goatweed onto the ground next to the buckets and Tuffnut held up the last chicken proudly, sporting a bruise on the cheekbone and a bloody tooth. A similarly battered Ruffnut huffed and crossed her arms, probably upset that she hadn't gotten to bring the thing in.

"Is that enough goatweed?" Fishlegs asked, looking worried. "That Nightmare looked really mad yesterday."

I nodded, hoping, actually, that I wouldn't need it at all. Out of

the corner of my eye, I saw Astrid giving Fish a weird look, but the sudden squawk from the door right behind me made my mind change tracks.

I waved back with my hands, indicating they should step away further. The group shared a look before doing so, Ruff and Tuff scrambling over one another until there was a good ten or so yards between us.

Smiling, I turned around and hauled the doors open. The Nadder burst out of its cage, and a few of the others yelped, but she only huffed and looked around, stopping when she saw me.

I waved. The Nadder cocked her head, taking a step forward.

"Hiccup, _run_" Snotlout hissed.

The Nadder looked up at the sound and narrowed her eyes at my human cousin. She opened her mouth, but I jumped forward and put my hand on her nose.

(**Mo!**)

The gobbles of a Nadder were easy for me to make with my mouth closedâ€"a growl is made in the chest, Night Fury warbles with the tongue, but a squawk like hers in the throat. It was garbled, and by the gods did it _sting_, but the little gaps between the stitches were enough for me to be heard. More or less.

(I was _really_ grateful I hadn't been wrong in guessing all of that.)

(**No?**) I nodded, glad she'd understood. ***(**Why not? I always attack when I'm released from that dam#ed small cave.**)"
The Nadder blinked down at me. *(**Silly squish, what's thâ€"?**)***

She froze when her large yellow eye stopped right in front of my face. I could see the horror in the slitted pupil. Great. Dragon-pity. ***(**Sky and sea, what _happened_ to you, kin of NÃ³tt's Prince?**)***

(**Mbad mhiking,**) I replied. The Nadder's eye narrowed, and she butted her nose into my chest. I heard Fishlegs squeak in fear as the inch-long fangs came inches from my face.

(**Your aerie won't be happy to see this,**) she pointed out.

Which was exactly why I was getting rid of them before he saw them. I pushed her back a little so I could look her in the eye, and let my fingers flatten on the still-could-be-shinier blue scales. ***(**MI need myer help. MBut mo attacking.**)***

(**My help?**) I nodded again. She shuffled her wings and sidestepped back and forth, thinking. ***(**You fed me. Polish my scales. Fine. I might as well. What do you need**?)***

(**Dhis off.**) I pointed at the stitches across my lips, not touching but following them across my mouth. ***(**Dhey'relâ€| mI

mean, skims. MI need hot fire to durm. Can myou durm mit?**)""

The look she gave me was flat. **"(**If you want to be sent to Hel as a pile of ashes, yes, I can. Please don't prove your species' intelligence by asking that of me.**)"**

I snorted and shook my head. **"(**MI'll be mokay. Drust me.**)"**

She eyed me warily. **"(**You trust me enough to do this?**)"" she asked, a little suspicious and surprised.

""(**Only MNight Dury dedder wid fire.**)"** The praiseâ€"very true praiseâ€"worked well, and she straightened proudly, preening her scales. **"(**MI'll de fine unless myou dite my head off. Myou're not dlanning on dhat, righd?**)""

She cocked her head again. **"(**â€|No.**)"**

I patted her nose. **"(**Dhen dhere'z no need to worry. Ready?**)""

The Nadder squawked in agreement and I let go of her to take a careful step back, aligning myself perfectly with her nose. I gestured to my face and nodded to the Nadder, then pointed to my arms and legs and shook my head. She nodded, having gotten the message.

"Hiccup!" Astrid suddenly called. The others were just staring; this would've been their first time seeing me speak Dragonese. "What're you doing?"

I patted the air gently (that universal sign for calm down had come in handy lately), which was hopefully reassuring enough.

Making sure they were far enough away, I turned back to the Nadder, lifting my face towards her. I closed my eyes and nodded.

"Waitâ€"Hiccup, _no!_"

Uuuakâ€"AAAAHHHHHHHHH

Screams echoed through the Ring. The blast of the hottest fire known to dragon-kind, which became nothing less than an _inferno_ with my head inside of it, immediately turned the stitches into ashes.

When the gentle, warm breeze stopped, I stood there, with my lips newly freed and freshly bleeding, and the taste of ash and blood in my mouth.

"Ow, ow, owâ€"oh, _blegh_," I grunted, dragging my tongue over my sleeve to get it off while my other hand went for the cloth Astrid had brought me in my coat. I used it to dab at the new holes, and winced at the stings.

When I smiled at the Nadder, it started bleeding again, but I just kept the cloth on it. "Thanks girl!" I said happily. "Never thought I'd be so glad to hear my own voice." The Nadder squawked and ruffled her wings, and I turned to the others. Embarrassment heated my cheeks

at the sight of every last teen except for Fishlegs gaping at me, slack-jawed.

(Fishlegs wasn't gaping because he was unconscious, having fainted.)

"Uhâ€| heh," I grinned at them crookedly. "Hi guys?"

"_What the fu(k was that_" Snotlout shrieked.

"_Awesome!"_ both twins yelled as one. "Do it again, do it again!" they started chanting.

I shifted awkwardly, not really sure how to explain it. "Uhâ€| it's a Gift. Well, that's what we call it." Hoping to distract them from that line of questioning, I went over and picked up the last chicken, tossing it over to the Nadder. "Here ya go."

The Nadder snapped it up, chomping happily. "Wait," Ruff said, "Nadders eat chicken?"

"I thought they feasted on human flesh," Tuff said, confused. "You know, like all dragons."

That was a misconception I was happy to correct. "Actually, every dragon I've come across hates the taste of sqâ€"people," I said. A weak groan cut off anything else I was about to sayâ€"Fishlegs was waking up. "Fish? Are you okay?" I asked.

"Y-yeah, I thinkâ€"_Hiccup!" He shot up vertical. "How are you not dead?!"

"He's 75% fireproof, apparently," Astrid replied, her arms crossed and her eyebrow high. Something told me she wasn't happy about the scare I'd just given them. I gave her a shaky grin, feeling more blood run down my chin. Urgh, why wouldn't it stop?

"Oh, and Nadders eat chicken," Tuffnut added as I wiped my face again, staining the cloth a little bit more. "I just made that discovery. I did. As a master dragonâ€| knowledgeable person. Put that in your Manual!"

Fishlegs rolled his eyes and got to his feet. "It's already in there," he replied shortly. "Nadders are the pickiest eaters out of all the dragons. They only eat chicken. Basically everything else is happy with whatever they findâ€"except eels, no dragon likes eel."

"Exacâ€"" _Wait_. I turned and squinted at the huge boy. "Fishlegs, how did you know that? That stuff's not in the Manual, I found that out myself, with Toothless."

All eyes turned to a suddenly anxious Fishlegs. Tuffnut narrowed his eyes. "Are you hiding a dragon and awesome powers too?" he demanded. "Does everyone on this island have powers? Waitâ€"do I have a power?" he asked, looking to his sister.

"Yeah. It's called being stupid."

"â€|Awesome."

"Fishlegs," Astrid said, cutting them off. "How did you know that stuff?"

Fishlegs looked around nervously, tapping his fingers together. "Uhâ€¦ it kinda _is_ in the Manual." I opened my mouth to argue, but he kept going.

"No, listen! I've been trying to tell you for _weeks,_ Hiccup! Honestly, I have, but I've never been able to catch you andâ€¦ Look, you've been writing down everything you found out about Night Furies, and dragons in general, in the Dragon Manual. I've been reading it every night, and stuff kept _showing up_â€¦ about eels, about goatweed, about dietary habits and behavior, and a _lot_ about Night Furiesâ€¦ and it was all in your handwriting!"

What? That couldn't beâ€¦

Freezing, I realized that he actually _was_ rightâ€¦ I _had_ been writing everything down. _In the Dragon Manual._

Where_ anyone _could've read it_.

If the rest of the island had been as interested in reading as Fishlegs was, I would've been found out in _days_. Not _six weeks_.

Slapping a hand on my forehead, I groaned. "Oh gods, Toothless is right," I realized. "I really _am_ a stupid Squish."

Astrid nodded firmly. "Yup. You are."

I looked up at Fishlegs and Astrid and held out my hands. "Do _not_ say anything about this to him. Or around him. Ever. _Please_. He'll never let me hear the end of it."

The twins sniggered. "Uh, guys?" Snotlout suddenly broke in. "I don't mean to freak out butâ€¦ _there's still a dragon right there_!"

I blinked and looked over. The Nadder was watching us all with one yellow eye, looking interested and curious. She squawked something, and I frowned.

"Gimme a sec," I said to the others, before walking up and easing my hand to her nose. "Sorry, what was that?"

"**(**Squishes are strange.**)"** I snorted and nodded. "**(**Do you need help with anything else?**)""**

I sighed and scratched my head. "Well, yeah. If you don't mind, I need a ride over to the Nestâ€¦ the, uh Dragon Nestâ€¦" she stiffened and her eyes narrowed in fear, so I quickly added, "but first I kinda want to let the others out too."

"Waitâ€¦ _that's_ your idea?" Astrid asked, stepping forward. "Riding a _dragon_ over there?"

I looked back at her and nodded. She exhaled hard, staring at me, then shook her head. "Okay. Don't know why I was expecting something more sane, since it's _you_, but okay." Astrid clenched her jaw and

crossed her arms. "Well then, I'm coming with you."

I blinked, surprised, but she cut me off before I could reply. "Someone needs to be around to make sure you don't fall in the ocean and die on the way there, and there's no way in Hel I'm staying behind when my parents are sailing to their deaths."

The Nadder picked her head up. **"(**I like this warrior squish,**)"** she said, turning to look Astrid up and down. **"(**Yes, I'll let her come on my back.**)"**

"Whaâ€œOh, of course you like her immediately," I yelped, slightly insulted. Astrid, predictably, smirked. "O-only took me two weeks to get anywhere near you without nearly losing a hand in the process!"

"(_She's_ a warrior,**)"** the Nadder sniffed. **"(**And you smell like NÃ³tt's Prince.**)"**

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, deciding not to comment.

"Wait," Snotlout said, coming forward. "If you two are going to go save everyone, I'm coming too!"

"And us!" the twins called.

I raised an eyebrow. "Uh, this Nadder is not going to be able to hold all of us."

"Then let the other dragons out," Fishlegs suggested. I stared at him. "What, you said you were planning on doing that anyway, right? Just, uhâ€œ| be careful with the Gronkle. It might want to eat you after you put it to sleep so many times."

I gaped, but then looked at the other cages. I'd been behind bars for a good 12 hours, and it had left me a depressed messâ€œhow long had these guys even been in there, cramped and lightless, without even a window?

â€œ|Not even including the six weeks I had knowingly left them in there?

My jaw set. **"(**Wait here, girl. I'm going to let the others out.**)"**

* * *

><p>I saved the Nightmare for last.<p>

Everyone else had been easyâ€œI'd done Slither and Tricky first, who'd exploded out of their cage and nearly bowled me over in happiness. Apparently, they'd heard the fight with the Nightmare and were pretty relieved that the Kind Squish was all right.

(Once they were done cheering the dragon into eating me, the twins had called them for their ownâ€œlike I would've asked them to go to anyone else.)

The Gronkle had been asleep, snoring like, well, a dragon, but I'd

managed to get her up and join the others in the sunlight. I even let the Terror out, catching him before he went after Tuff's nose again and releasing him outside of the Ring after a few words.

"Why'd you do that?" Fishlegs asked, watching the little guy fly away.

"Terrors live in big aeries," I explained, my heart aching at the word and the thought of my own. "Most of these other guysâ€"well, I'd be surprised if any of their families are still around. But that guy has a better chance than the others and besides, it's not like we can ride him."

"Heyâ€"which one's gonna be mine?" Snotlout asked loudly, turning me away from my thoughts and back into the Ring. "There's no way I'm riding that stupid flying rock!"

I took a slow and careful breath. "Snotlout," I said seriously, "you've got the Nightmare."

A beat of silence beforeâ€" | "What?" he yelped, fear entering his eyes for a moment. He glanced around at the others before straightening his back. "I meanâ€"uh, of course! The only dragon worthy of a rider like me!"

I glanced over at the doors holding the red dragon, charred from yesterday, but reinforced to be temporarily useable. I am so sorry for what I'm about to unleash on you, you poor, poor reptile.

The doors opened slowly and without an explosion this time.

Swallowing nervously, I walked forward into the dark cage. The huge dragon shifted in the shadows, and I wished I had Toothless's eyesight. "Hey there, big guy," I said, smiling weakly. "Do youâ€"do you wanna come out?"

The Nightmare hissed dangerously and I flinched before steeling myself. I was bruised and battered and nearly cut to ribbons, but I would not back down from this guy. We needed to get to the island as soon as possibleâ€"no time for me to be scared.

I held a hand out. "I'm notâ€" | I'm going to hurt you, I promise. What happened yesterday w-was an accident, and I'm sorry. It's gonna be okay, alright? It's going to be okay."

Slowly, painfully slowly, the tip of a red snout and long white fangs came into the light, sliding neatly into my palm. The skin was warm, even warmer than Toothless's, and I felt my throat shift to match a Nightmare's growl.

"**~**Hey there,**~**" I said with a shaky smile. Thinking quickly, I decided that Toothless would just have to learn to deal with the new addition to our familyâ€"telling a dragon my name, which opens up the possibility of becoming aerie, was the fastest way to gain their trust. ****~**My name's Hiccup. Do you remember yours?~****

"**~**â€"No.**~**" I still wasn't used to the sad tone in their voices when they admitted that, but I was unsurprisedâ€" none of

them remembered. A side effect of being caged for so long, probably.
-**But you, _Hiccup_â€”you smell of NÃ³tt's Prince, and have him protect you? A _squish_?-***

I shrugged. ***-**I don't _have_ him do anything, not if he doesn't want to. He's my aerie.***-***

The dragon snorted. ***-**Princes don't have _aeries_, and if they did, they wouldn't be _squishes_.***-***

-**Yeah, well,-*** I smiled wryly, not at all insulted, ***-**apparently, I'm a very special Squish. Now I'm going to lead you out into the sun, if you want.***-***

The Nightmare squinted thoughtfully. ***-**Alright. But don't do anything rash,***-*** he growled.

-**I won't, I promise.-***

It was like I'd been given a second chance at yesterday's fiascoâ€”I led the Nightmare out, stepping backwards carefully and keeping the same distance between me and him.

I heard the others gasp as I came closer to them than I had beforeâ€”I hadn't yet let them actually touch any of the dragons, and I was going to start with Snotlout. Gods help me.

-**I'm going to introduce you to my cousin,-*** I growled softly. ***-**He'sâ€”| not the brightest, unfortunately, but I think you'll like him anyway. He's got a pretty, uhâ€”| _fiery_ temper.***-***

-**Puns are the lowest form of wit,-*** the Nightmare said, and I _beamed_, stretching my injured lips all the way, and ignoring the sting.

-**Oh, I think I'm gonna like you.-***

He snorted, scaring the others a little. The sound made him start and look to the side, but I jumped and managed to catch his attention again. ***-**Whoa! It's okay! It's ookay. They're not going to hurt you either. See, no weapons. Just harmless squishes. The one with the curly horns is Snotlout.***-***

The Nightmare looked him over, and I could hear Snotlout start whimpering. Something in his eyes softened. ***-**He reminds meâ€”| a hatchling I had. The color of the horns, and that strange fur underneath is as spiky as her spines were.***-***

There was sadness in his voice, and I didn't think I wanted to know, or that he'd appreciate me asking, so I didn't press.
-**Well,-*** I admitted slowly, ***-**I wouldn't say _hatchling_ is a bad description. He _does_ need someone to make sure he doesn't get into too much trouble.***-***

-**â€”|Yes, _definitely_ like my hatchling then.-***

I smiled at the fondness already in his tone, and reached back. Snotlout pulled away, scared. "Wait, what're youâ€”?"

The Nightmare snorted. ***-**Still as loud as any squish, though.**-***

"Shhh!" I hissed at my human cousin. "It's okay. It's oookay," I said, in the exact same tone I'd just used on the dragon. The irony wasn't exactly lost on me. I took his wristâ€"which was nearly wider than my whole bicepâ€"to keep him calm and steady, and moved his outstretched hand onto the Nightmare's snout.

(And so I ended up training both dragons _and_ Vikings.)

Snotlout started laughing in exhilaration, and the Nightmare hummed. ***-**Yes, very much a hatchling,**-*** was all I caught before I removed my hand.

Triumphant, I went behind him towards the box of supplies inside the tunnel. "Waitâ€"where're you goin'?" Snotlout demanded, sounding almost panicked and not removing his hand.

"You're fine, he already likes you!" I assured him before finding and pulling out the rope from before. "We're gonna need something to hold on. Flight can get a littleâ€"|"

"Turbulent?" Astrid asked, her grin knowing, and I smiled shyly at her.

"Uhâ€"| to say the least."

"Wait, let me get this straight. We're all going to _fly_ to the island?" Ruffnut asked. "We're gonna _use_ the things we've been fighting against for _centuries_, to find the Dragon's Nest?"

The second the words were out of her mouth, Slither _screeched_. I winced and covered my ears, because Tricky was right behind him, and even the Gronkle started yowling, cowering back.

"Whoa, whoa, guys!" I ran forward, trying to reach for a hold. The Zippleback was moving too high, out of my arm-span. Lost for a moment, I did the only thing I could think of.

"Calm_ down_!***" I roared, the Night Fury sound echoing in the Ring, and the dragons froze, eyes looking down at me. I held up my hand and Tricky lowered his head to meet it.

"_****_You freed us from one prison to take us back to another?_**\"**_ he asked, his eyes wide. _****_I'd rather stay here for the rest of my life thanâ€"than have my head eaten into again!_**\"**_

I remembered the sensation and winced in sympathy. "I know, I know, it's not fun. _Believe me_, I know. But we're not planning on going back and working for her. Tooâ€"er, NÃ³tt's Prince is over there and we," I couldn't help but smirk, suddenly feeling like it was my cousin himself speaking through me, "_We_ are going to go and kick that eel-swallowing parasite out of your mountain."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

The Nightmare lifted his head up from under Snotlout's hand, and _roared_. My human cousin squeaked, but then gaped with the others as

the rest of the dragons turned their heads up and joined in, the mixing sounds of Nightmare, Zippleback, Nadder, and Gronkle grating against the ears, louder than anything except a Night Fury.

"What're they _saying_?" Astrid asked, looking up at all of them with something like awe.

"They said," I grinned, looking around the approving dragons before turning back down to them, "let's go kick that fat dragon's butt."

* * *

><p>There was only one problem with that.<p>

Everyone had gotten onto their dragons, shaky and clutching ropes tightly until I told them it was okay to hold onto the _actual_ dragon, as long as they didn't squeeze enough to hurt. The others compromised, mostly, by grabbing onto horns as hard as possible.

We were all ready to go, until I tried to get on the Nadder behind Astrid.

She danced out of the way. Frowning, I tried again, and she moved away again, Astrid bouncing with a short cry on her back. "Hey, what's wrong?" I asked, waving my arms.

"Maybe she thinks you're too weak for her to ride!" Snotlout shouted, snickering. Unfortunately for everyone within hearing range, his bluster and egotism had returned quickly after he realized that the dragon _wasn't_ actually going to have him for a late dagmal. "It takes a _real man_ to know how to deal with a woman!"

Astrid and I both turned around just in time to see the Nightmare shake his head hard. Snotlout yelped as he was nearly thrown off of his neck and had to hold on tight. The return of Snotlout's bravado might have beenâ€| unwelcome, to say the least, but at least it looked like the Nightmare was already taking the raising of his new hatchling seriously, and that made me smile.

"_Thank_ youâ€|Mrâ€|. Nightmare?" Astrid said, before looking at me oddly. "You're sure these guys don't have names?"

"If they do, they've forgotten them." I went up to face the Nadder. "Lookâ€|I know I'm not a warrior like Astrid is, but I promise, it's only tempâ€|"

The Nadder shook her head, squawking. I frowned and put my hand on her nose. ***(**That's not it.**)* **

(**Then why won't you let me ride you?**) I asked.

She huffed a breath. ***(**You are aerie to the Prince.**)* ** I nodded. ***(**You ride him.**)* ** I nodded again, still not understanding. ***(**You fly in the air with the best of dragons, as is your due as his aerie, even if you aren't a Prince yourself.**)* ** I frowned and she sighed, grumbling. ***(**You are kin to a Prince. So to us, no dragon is worthy enough to have you ride them, except for him.**)* **

I choked on my own surprise. "_What_?" I asked, not believing what I

was hearing. "_Me_? Are you kiddiâ€"I don't weigh a hundred pounds, you-you wouldn't even _notice_ if I was on your back!"

Slither and Tricky hissed behind me. Though I couldn't understand what they were saying, they were looking at the Nadder and seemed to be in agreement.

"But I need to get over there!" I yelped, panicking a little. "Toothless and my dad are right in the line of fire, and-and he can't even fly without me! You _have_ to let me fly you, _one _of you!"

I looked down the line of dragons, but none of them would meet my eyes. The Gronkle looked away, and Slither and Tricky glanced at one another instead of me. The Nightmare rolled his eyes up to Snotlout, growling at him under his breath.

I looked back to the Nadder. **"(**I will not _kidnap_ the kin of a Prince,**)"** the Nadder said, shaking her head. **"(**I'm sorry.**)"**

Sighing, I scrubbed a hand down my face, wincing when I hit the bruised cheekbones and the scabby piercings. "Great. If I can't fly, how'm I gonna get over there?"

"Too bad it's not Devastating Winter yet," Tuff called.

"Why's that?" Ruff asked.

"Because then he could just walk over the ice, duh!"

I froze. "That's it. That's it!" I looked up at Tuffnut, grinning brightly. "Tuff, Iâ€"I can't believe I'm about to say this, but you're a genius!"

"_Finally_! Someone appreciates me for my true core self!"

"You're gonna freeze the ocean?" Fishlegs asked, sounding skeptical. "Uhâ€"I don't want to doubt you, because I still don't know what you _can't_ do, but that seems a little extreme."

"I'm not going to freeze the ocean." I took a breath and looked over at the tunnel. I'd never run this far beforeâ€"but it wasn't as if I had much of a choice, and to be honest, the idea of _really_ testing my running was far from scary. If anything, I was _thrilled_.

Glancing back at the dragons, I said, "Alrightâ€"take them to the Nest. I'll be following below. Guys," I added, turning to the Vikings on their back, "if they start acting weird, if their pupils start getting really narrow, snap them out of it. Yell, or-or pull on their ear or something, _whatever_ you have to do, but _get them out of it_. This thing takes over their minds, and we _don't_ want any friendly fire."

"Wait, what about you?" Astrid asked. "Hiccup, the last time you saw this thingâ€"

"The last time I saw this thing, I wasâ€"you know, doing that thing with Toothless I still don't have a name for? I think _that's_ why it affected me."

"You think or know?" she asked, eyebrow rising.

That made me pause, before I looked over to the Nightmare. "Fly low, please," I asked, and he lowered his head to meet my eyes. "If I start sinking, you'll have to catch me."

The Nightmare snorted in agreement, but Snotlout looked confused. "Sinking? The only boats left on Berk are rowboats! It'll take _forever_ for you to get there! We're not waiting that long!"

"No," I agreed. "We're not."

* * *

><p>Gothi had led a long life.<p>

She'd tried her best to make every year count. Born as the only child to a high-ranking couple, she'd quickly taken on the burden of honor that her illegitimate half-brother, Hiccup the II, couldn't, by their laws. Sometimes she saw her own youth in the Hofferson girl, so desperate to regain her uncle's lost pride and too blind as of yet to realize that it didn't truly matter in the long run.

She'd fallen in love as a young Viking, and was married to the strongest and most caring man she knew, Heykr the Horrendous. She'd re-affirmed her family honor by killing the dragon that had destroyed it, the honor that her half-brother had taken with him to the Otherworlds when he dueled and died by the monster.

She'd lived many, many decades as the wife of the Chief, as capable as anyone in her position could ever be. She'd led the island's women, the harvest and the homes, and gave her husband his cues when his brute strength got ahead of his good sense. She'd raised a trio of young boys, wrangling them well and helping her husband bring them up to be respectful and excellent leaders. She'd wrangled her dear husband similarly.

Her place over those decades had been in the home, and she'd welcomed it. She'd often gone out to hunt and to fight, and she'd enjoyed that greatly, but her soul had always been one for the home, for love and for the care of family.

But time is a force as constant and as wearing as an ocean current. With every year that tacked a tally onto her age line, her body shrank, muscles withering away. Her bones weakened and her back bent. Skin that was once supple and golden greyed and wrinkled. Her copper hair turned silver with wisdom, and she began using a cane. Her throat ached her more with every passing year, until she stopped speaking all-together, the year she sent her Heykr ahead of her to Valhalla.

Gothi knew better than to swim against ocean currentsâ€"she'd seen so many of her village's young, foolish children drown that way. So when she realized that it was going to be her turn to settle down, so slow her active life, she did not fight it. She let her boysâ€"men, nowâ€"begin their own homes, one on another island, and one at the helm of this one, and the third as a second-in-command. She watched them marry, and settled down in her chair, finished with her active life.

Her place was to heal, to guide now. Let the youth run their lives, let them lead the world and themselves around. She was content as an observer—such was her place now, as mother and Chief's wife had been so many years ago, as honor-bearer had been even longer ago, and she would fill that role as capably as she had those others.

But then Valka died.

Her Stoick was inconsolable. The woman had had just enough time to name the boy before passing to Frigg's Hall, where mothers spent their eternity. But Stoick could not care for the child, mourning as he was. Her age had shown her how to read signs, and she knew that the storm, and the eclipse, meant that the boy would bring change to the island. Great change.

Gothi could not allow her young grandson to die; not Valka's child, who she'd loved as a daughter, and not her son's only boy-child. And she wouldn't let even a stranger die with that kind of future ahead of him.

She could put her settled life to the side, for a little while.

So Gothi raised little Hiccup herself. And when people came to her door, demanding that the runt be sacrificed, for only the strong belong (and damn her half-brother for ever coming up with such a phrase), she defended him the only way her weak body would allow.

She shook her cane. She garbled nonsense. She threatened to call down the rage of the gods. She blew smoke in their faces, and they flinched.

Meanwhile, Hiccup grew. Marginally. Her Hiccup, sweet and caring as her Heykr had been behind closed doors, with his russet hair; just as open-minded as his mother, with her green eyes; and just as whip-smart as his grandmother, in her own humble opinion. He didn't take after her much otherwise, but he got the important bits.

And when he was three, Stoick returned to her hut on the sea and took the boy back. Gothi hugged him, but knew it was for the best. A boy should be raised by his father.

She'd thought it was for the best. But maybe Stoick should've been raised a bit more by his mother, instead of his stoic father.

Gothi stood now on the edge of the dock, looking out to the horizon. The sea breeze was salty and chilled, but it was good to feel something beyond the impending doom in her heart. Her eyes were weary and her hands were trembling.

Her son was off on some hare-brained search for the Dragon's Nest, her grandson had been locked into prison, the both of them had been keeping secrets from her, and worst of all, she'd heard the way her little Hiccup had reacted when that dragon had been brought down.

She was a Healer. She'd heard people scream in denial when they had their shield-brothers taken away from them. She'd never wanted to hear it from her grandchild, from the boy she raised to

toddlerdom.

Dragon be dam#ed, she wanted that beast back at her boy's side, where it belonged.

But her old bones told her that something even worse than her grandson's grief would come soon. Every able-bodied and over-age man and woman had left Berk to find that Nestâ€”half of them had died last time. She had a horrible certainty that even fewer would return this go around.

Gothi sighed, regret and pre-emptive grief starting to weigh her down. If only she'd taught her son to listen as well as he ledâ€”|

Her Hiccup would be
devastatâ€”

AAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRR

"Whooooooooooooohooooooooooo!"

Gothi jumped, and gaped at the sight of five dragons soaring above the steppes of Berkâ€”and were those teenagers on their backs?

Just as she turned her head back down, she was knocked over by a gust of wind. A blur in front of her turned around sharply over the water, kicking up a tall wave before hitting the docks again.

Her little Hiccupâ€”bruised, battered, bleeding, but still smiling as crookedly as he ever hadâ€”and were those holes on his lips?â€”picked her up by the arm. "Sorry Grandma," he said, sheepish.

She gaped for all of two seconds. Then Gothi squinted, smirked, and whacked him across the head with her staff. "Ow!" Gothi pointed over the ocean. "Whaâ€”?"

"Go save my fool of a son, boy," she said, rasping with the voice only he ever got to hear. It would ache at her old throat for weeks, but it was worth it to see his face.

Hiccup blinked at her, then grinned brightly. "Yes ma'am!" he laughed, before disappearing in a brown streak across the ocean.

* * *

><p>Hope you liked it! I wanted to do a scene from Toothless's POV, but Gothi doesn't get enough love, and it'll be half his POV during the fight, so.

**Oh, and if ever screws up bad with the posting again, please check my Tumblr (author-of-the-unfinished. tumblr. com), tagged SG or Special Gifts, and I'll try to have it on there.
:)**

PEACE,

~Tibki

22. Chapter 22

****Hey y'all!****

****I feel obliged to warn you-classes start this week and I am completely and totally unsure of how often I'll be able to revise and post to my best quality. My GPA last semester was too low-due to forces both in and out of my control-and I need the best scores I can manage. Unfortunately, without proper schooling, I can't get a job, which is necessary to pay for wifi, which is necessary to post fics.****

****What I'm saying is, next week's postings might slow a little. I'll do my best to keep up my once-a-day promise, and I'll definitely catch back up on weekends, but during the week... I don't know. Please don't hate me!****

****Anyway, here's today's chapter. Hope you like it!****

****DISCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO_

Fishlegs had once called himself Hiccup's best friend.

He hadn't been the only one eitherâ€”when they were little, like really little, as in back when Hiccup had just been taken back into his father's care and before anyone really realized what a menace to the village he'd become, Fishlegs and Astrid had both hung out with Hiccup a lot.

They read books with him, eyes wide as they imagined the different kinds of dragons; they played pretend hunts and raids with Astrid, sneaking through the woods and giggling when they found one another; and sung kid songs Hiccup had been taught by Astrid's mother or played games the Heir would make up himself, smiling softly in his case, friendly and sharp in Astrid's case, and widely in Hiccup's. It was a golden age of childhood, and they loved it, but they'd all known it had to end eventually.

To be honest, all of them were eager to see it endâ€”adults got the glory, adults could defend the village. Kids couldn't.

Given time, it happened. Astrid turned a good 98% of her focus onto her training instead of her friends, losing her distinctive friendly-if-sharp smile. The effect was especially obvious after taking on the responsibility of the fire brigade and her family's honor. She stopped having time for the two of them, and he and Hiccup were left to read and sing and play alone.

Another few years passed, and the growing Fishlegs had realized that despite his weak lungs, he was suddenly towering over his friend. A good plus-ten in height, actually. Hiccup didn't seem to care thoughâ€”even once asked to ride on his shoulders, because the view was so much nicer.

He also noticed that Snotlout picked up the tendency of pulling his younger cousin out of sight of parentsâ€”Fishlegs was just a little too scared to go and see what exactly was happening, but then the next time he stood up in front of Hiccup, towered over him, Hiccup had flinched, and then run away.

The next day was the day Jarn had spilled wax on the Dragon Manual and Fishlegs discovered his Berserker blood; he was allowed into the fire brigade, and Astrid welcomed him back with a sharp smile.

After that, he never gave Hiccup a thought, to be honest, not beyond 'look how much destruction he caused today, that's a 30% increase from normal'. Not until he started succeeding at Dragon Trainingâ€”when he was a little happy for the scrawny hiccup having finally started his own journey into Vikingdom, late but still getting thereâ€”and still not really remembering his old friend until he saw the new additions to the Dragon Manual.

Fishlegs had no idea why he hadn't told anyone about the daily additions. Maybe it was curiosity, because if he told, Hiccup would have to explain and the new information would stop coming. Maybe it was because some little remnant of the zero-height, negative-fifteen strength, weak-lunged Fishlegs who'd been friends with Hiccup had wanted to protect him. But whatever it was, he kept silent, and watched from afar.

Like he was doing now.

"He's gonna be Death, and the other one can be Rosie, cause you're a girl and she's a girl tooâ€”ow!"

With some amount of deviation from his goal. Fishlegs turned his head up as Astrid swooped in by Tuffnut's side of the Zippleback. "Ruffnut! No fighting while in the air!" she yelled, getting both their attentions. "You'll fall off and die! And Tuff, they're both the same dragon and Hiccup called them a him!"

"Remind me again why it was a good idea to bring them?" Snotlout asked. For once, the Nightmare didn't correct his rudenessâ€”probably because it agreed with him, Fishlegs figured.

"We might need their firepower," he pointed out.

"Firepower?" Snotlout repeated, scoffing. "Why would we need more firepower when we have a Nightmare?"

Fishlegs shrugged. "If this dragon is as big as Astrid says it isâ€”|"

"Oh it's bigger! And it's not actually a dragon!"

Fishlegs and Snotlout looked down. A brown blur was cutting a long line over the ocean just below them, easily keeping up with the dragons' flight without the use of wings. On either side of it, water splashed up in huge arcs, and a wake was created just behind the tip.

Fishlegs was still having a hard time processing that it was possible to move so fast something could run on waterâ€”much less that

Hiccup could manage it.

And have managed it for an hour so far, with no sign of tiring or stopping.

[They'd been friends for years, and Hiccup had never even hinted at abilities like this. His statistics chart would need a complete overhaul.]

But like he'd said before, he really couldn't tell what Hiccup _couldn't_ do at this point, so Fishlegs sighed and put aside his mental stats sheet for the skinny son of the Chief. He'd have time to ask specifics later, the current situation was more pressing.

"Please go down a little bit?"

The Gronkle underneath him snorted but did as it was asked, the fast-beating wings on either side never slowing as they dropped in altitude. It was strange, to be asking a dragon nicely for something, and stranger for it to be _working_.

He'd learned so much about dragons from Hiccup's additions to the Manualâ€| but to actually see it in _action_, like he had in the Ringâ€| Fishlegs, beyond his crippling, fainting fear, had been nearly vibrating in excitement.

Now, though, they were zipping right along, just beside Hiccup. The atmosphere was rather relaxed, especially considering that they were going to face an entire village of armed Vikings while _riding dragons_â€"good Baldr he was riding a dragonâ€"and Fishlegs figured it had at least a little to do with the specific people _on_ this journey.

The twins, while fun enough to hang out with normally, were too dumb and too Vikingly to realize what kind of serious danger they were flying to. Astrid didn't have the patience to deal with them for long, so the annoyance overcame any worry she might've felt. Snotlout was as brazen and bold as ever, and Fishlegs was too astonished at being _on a dragon's back_ at the current moment to be too frightened of the future.

And then there was Hiccupâ€|

Going at this speed, Fishlegs could see the big grin across his bloody lips and the light of peace in his eyes. It was a weird look on him, because Fishlegs's mental picture of the Chief's son was of him in the middle of a snarky comment, eyebrows low and eyes dim, but his face clean. His stomach twistedâ€"why did this feel like the first time he'd ever seen him really, truly smile, even bloody and bruised like he was?

He _knew_ that he'd seen Hiccup smile when they were kidsâ€| but the sheer number of times he'd seen the boy sad, withdrawn, and sarcastic overwhelmed those times into an outlier of a majority. Fishlegs had called himself Hiccup's best friend, once upon a timeâ€"why hadn't he noticed that his friend had drawn into himself so much?

"What do you mean, it's not a dragon?" he asked, instead of thinking further on that train of thought.

Hiccup shrugged. "It's not, not really. Dragons are born, or made, as dragons. Like the Gronkles, or Toothless. The thing in the mountain, they call it a parasite—it's the daughter of Hel."

"Wait—this thing's _mother_ is _death_?" Snotlout repeated.

"No, Death is a boy!"

"Not your dragon, idiot, the _Queen of Niflheim_!"

"Oh. Well, he's still a boy."

"If it makes you feel any better, Toothless's mom is Hel too!" Astrid shouted.

Fishlegs's eyes grew wide, remembering the words on the Manual's page. "Unholy offspring of lightning and death itself—the Night Fury is the child of Thor and Hel!"

"In a way," Hiccup nodded, "It's more complicated than that, but effectively."

"Who cares! Isn't that Helheim's Gate?"

Snotlout's shout made them all glance up. A huge cloud of fog and steam rose before them, white and impossible to see through. Fishlegs swallowed, and he felt the dragon shudder underneath him.

He remembered how the Gronkle had cowered at the very mention of the Dragon's Nest. It was strange, and he almost felt sorry for the dragon—she was obviously terrified. "It's okay, girl," he said, patting her awkwardly on the head. "We'll be fine. I'll—I'll try to make sure it doesn't take over your mind."

The Gronkle made a sound he didn't recognize and, looking at her in confusion, Fishlegs missed the way Hiccup looked up and smiled—seconds before he shouted in pain and nearly stumbled.

"Hiccup!" Astrid screamed, but the boy was still going—he hadn't tripped and sunken, just missed a step and had had to rebalance himself.

The other dragons suddenly screeched and roared, the Gronkle twisting dangerously in the air. "What's going on?" Fishlegs shouted, holding on for all he was worth.

"I! Don't! Know!"

The Zippleback was shaking its heads up and down, the only way it could without slamming into one another, Fishlegs guessed, and the twins were along for the ride, being seated just behind each head.

"But! I! Like! It!"

"We just hit the parasite's range!" Hiccup yelled, and his voice was tight with something that sounded an awful lot like pain. "It's trying to br-break into—into their heads and—_argh_!"

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs shouted as the Chief's son grabbed at his temples, screaming. "_Hiccup!_"

"If he stops running, he's going to drown!" Astrid yelled, her voice high with panic. "Fishlegs, watchâ€"!"

**EEEEERRRROOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA**

The sound _exploded_ from Hiccup like a Zippieback's gas, shaking Fishlegs _physically_ and nearly popping his eardrums so close. It shook inside the chests of the other teens and the volume made them cringe, staring down in shock.

When it was over, their dragons _roared_ together and steadied. "What in Hel's name was _that_?" Astrid shouted.

"Whatever it was, it worked!" Snotlout replied.

"I don't actually know what that was!" Hiccup was still running, but looked more confused and paler than Fishlegs could ever remember him being. "I justâ€"I don't know!"

* * *

><p>I did know what that was. Sort of.<p>

"_**Remember your Prince, and forget the child of J  rmungandr!**_"

J  rmungandr was the child of Lokiâ€"and, I guessed, father to the parasite too, which was kinda nasty, because he and Hel were _siblings_â€"and was a sea serpent. The words I'd said had both reminded them that there was a job to do (free the Prince, that they shouldn't forget about that) and also managed to seriously insult the thing in the mountain.

But I had no idea where the words _came_ from. I didn't know that the parasite was daughter to J  rmungandr, and I didn't know that Toothless wasn't just _a_ Prince but _their_ Prince; that the other dragons had _loyalty_ to Toothless. I _also_ had no idea where the affect of the roar had come from, the soothing calm that settled over and completely closed off the sore that had nearly busted open again in our minds.

I could only imagine it had soothed the other dragons' similar sores, because once I said it, they'd roared in agreement, and gotten back into normal flight pattern.

But I couldn't explain any of that to the others, and I was so confused, so I simplyâ€"I didn't tell them.

We entered the fog of Helheim's Gate. The dragons above me had little trouble navigating the spires, and luckily, I did too. I don't know whether it was some high-speed reflex instinct for running (I'd never had any trouble running through thick forests before either, but then again, there, I could actually see the trees coming), or if it was something left over from Toothless, but I didn't ask too many questions.

Getting through here had worried me earlier, and now it wasn't a problem. Asking how would probably be tempting the gods at this point, and I needed them on my side.

An enormous _noise_ suddenly broke through the fog as we were going through it. Screeches and shrieks of dragons, thousands of them, and wing beats as they tried to flee for their lives. There was a moment's silence, where even the others were shocked and maybe scared still, and thenâ€

Cr-cr-cr- k

**RRRRRRRRRRRRRRROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAA**

I felt the blood drain from my face at the soundâ€"loud enough to ache my eardrums, but far enough away to dampen the pain somewhat. That was not the sound of something sleeping peacefully in a mountain. "We're too late!" Astrid realized alongside me. "It's out!"

"_That_ was it?" Snotlout shrieked, terrified. Dad and Toothless were up there right nowâ€"the gods only knew what was about to happen to them, to the entire village.

"C'monâ€"we have to help them!" I shouted, and doubled my speed.

We arrived to _chaos_â€"ships were burning on the beach, Vikings were scattering on the ground, and the parasite was _out_ of the mountain, even bigger than it had looked inside of it.

Nothing less than two _hundred_ feet high, she was pale blue and bulky, fat with three centuries of sitting still and taking in other dragons' food. There were spines along her side, around the edges of her jaw, and down her backâ€"the ones on her back were _huge_, like ancient trees, wide and tall, blue and jagged. The jaw was massive and powerful, and extended into a bony crown on her head that made my eyes narrow and something deep in my chest growl in insult.

"_Dam#_ that thing is _ugly_!" Tuffnut shouted as we drew closer.

Rubble from the cracked-open mountain was lying at its massive feetâ€"each paw was the size of three longboats side by sideâ€"and it was diving its head at the Vikings fleeing like terrified ants so far below.

"They're in formation!" Astrid yelled, pointing at the crowdsâ€"she had a better view than I did, from dragonback. "Spitelout's leading everyone around, but Hiccup, your dadâ€"!"

She didn't have to tell meâ€"I could hear my father and Gobber both yelling to get the parasite's attention. I needed a view from above in order to make a better plan and to find Toothlessâ€"the juts of rock could probably help with thatâ€"but until then, I had to make sure none of my family were killed.

"Everyone!" I shouted up, thinking fast. "Arrow formation and keep it! Nadder on point, Nightmare and Zipple at her wings and Gronkle at the tails! Swing around and fire together behind the crown â€"do not

hit each other!_"

"Right!" The dragons swung around and away, and I looked around quickly, barely noticing as my feet went from water to pebblesâ€"there!

I zoomed over the beach and towards a spire-shaped lava formation sticking through the dirt, one that had a smooth enough incline for me to run most of the way up. With momentum helping me, I grabbed the ledge and struggled to pull myself the rest of the way to the top.

Here, I was above even the parasite's head, and I had the perfect view when the dragons attacked, just as the thing was about to blast my father and not-father, the whole maneuver going exactly like I'd planned. And how could it go wrong, with two warriors like Astrid and the Nadder at the head?

The parasite shook her head, obviously surprised by the blast, and came frightening close to them as they flew back around. "RUFF, TUFF, WATCH YOUR BACKS!" I shouted, cupping my mouth. "MOVE, FISHLEGS!"

Unsurprisingly, the twins ignored me in favor of screaming down to the shocked Vikings below.

"LOOK AT US, WE'RE ON DRAGONS!" Tuffnut shouted. "WE'RE ON DRAGONS! ALL OF US!"

"AND WE JUST _WASTED_ THAT THING!"

"WOULD YOU TWO PLEASE PAY ATTENTION FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIVES?" I shrieked, a Dragonese screech nearly breaking through my voice.

"There's Hiccup!"

Astrid led the group back around so that they were circling around my perch. "Fishlegs, break her down!" I ordered, pointing to the parasite. We needed to know more about her, if we wanted half a chance. "Weakness and danger points!"

"Okayâ€" Fishlegs sounded out of breathâ€"his lungs had gotten a little stronger over the years, but I still worried that he might be out of this quicklyâ€"but not as terrified as I'd expected. "Heavily armored skull and tail used for bashing and crushingâ€"steer clear of both! Small eyes, big nostrils, relies on hearing and smell!"

"Can you hear what she's saying?" Astrid yelled to me.

"Sort of!" She _roared_ and I winced, the sound pounding at my ears but not breaking into my head; the volume was a _lot_ worse up close. Words danced around the edges of my understanding, just barely out of my grasp. "Not really! Don't worry about the mind-control, whatever I did earlier is holding, but she's still very fu(king _loud_!"

"Do we got a plan?" Snotlout asked. "Or are we just going straight at it, Viking-style?!"

I had a feeling that was what my father triedâ€"I didn't want to make

Astrid, to her credit, didn't even ask how I knew, and the Nadder, to her credit, didn't even argue as they leapt up, snatched my shoulders in her claws, and carried me down.

I squalled directions to the Nadder as we swooped low, warned her that it was about to get hot when we neared the flamesâ€"she laughed at meâ€"and yelled at her to **""(D**rop**!)""** when I was above the deck holding Toothless.

My bare feet hit the wood, my arms and legs tingling immediately with the heat surrounding usâ€"only my callused soles were protecting my feet, and that would only be temporary as the fires grew.

"Go help the others!" I shouted to the flying pair before turning back to my own dragon. His pupils were narrow and flitting over me desperatelyâ€"they turned paper-thin on sight of my faceâ€"and I could hear fast, muffled words coming from his chest, muted by the muzzle. **""**Don't worry Cousin just hold on I'm getting you out of this!***""**

Grabbing the leather bond around his head, I yanked back, planting my feet on the edge of his trap, and pulled.

It popped off and fell away, and I pulled out my file to start levering at the chains. **""H**iccup, _what in Hvergelmir!_ You have to get out of here**!""** Toothless screeched, his mouth now freed enough to speak.

""Not listening to you**!""** I said, and dove for an abandoned sword when the file proved too small. I threaded it into the staple holding the chains that kept the trap locked to the deck and started pushing up.

""You stupid Squish, we're on a shipâ€"when this burns under us we'll _sink_ and you'll _drown_**!""**

""Don't care**!""** I grunted, pushing hard. Dam#it, why wasn't this working?! **""I**'m not _leaving_ _y_â€"***!""**

A heavy blue mace of a tail slapped into the water a few ships away, sending our own boat tilting wildly on the surging water. Even before it could capsize, though, an enormous foot slammed down, pulverizing the nearest boat, and the force cracked our deck in half.

I was tossed into the water, my balance thrown off and colors blurring blue and yellow and brown. My mouth and nose snapped shut and the complete lack of air and possible movement in any direction had me freeze in terrorâ€"but then I glimpsed Toothless sinking, still in his trap, and any other thought disappeared.

Moving my arms was the hardest thing I'd ever doneâ€"the water felt like tree-sap, and it was enveloping me completelyâ€"but I did it, and I kicked, using my natural sinking to move faster towards Toothless.

My cheeks were ballooned with air and my lungs were already complaining when I hit the seafloor next to him, but I ignored it. He saw me and started struggling desperately, the chains clinking even

underwater.

I narrowed my eyes and grabbed it, brushing against his paw for a momentâ€”worry, terror, __**get the FLAME out of here Hiccup!**_â€”before pulling on that dam#ed chain.

The exertion and the water sapped me of my strength faster than I'd ever felt, but I kept pulling even as black spots danced over my eyes, even when they stole away my vision completely.

My lungs screamed, but I didn't care. I had to get Toothless out.

I _had_ to get Toothless out.

I had to geâ€”

_Toothless_â€”

* * *

><p>The next thing I knew, I was back on shore, hacking water and taking in glorious air.<p>

For a moment, I wondered if I was back testing Toothless's fin for the first time and if everything else had been a beautiful, terrible nightmareâ€”then I blinked and saw a dark red shape dive into cold waters that were certainly _not_ the cove's lake.

Was thatâ€” "Dad?"

The few moments where I was sitting, shocked and struggling to breathe again, on that rock, were some of the worst in my life. I was stuck on shore, helpless, my dad and my cousinâ€”my whole familyâ€”were in that water and _not_ coming back up_â€”

A black shape _tore_ out of the sea, dropping a heavy load in front of me, and once I realized that Dad was okay, thank Thor, I followed the smooth, short flight as Toothless leapt onto a higher spot on the same rock.

"Now come _on_, we've got an eel to gut!**** he growled, jerking his head to the parasite. ****And I'm going to yell at you for your face and for trying to _swim_ when we survive this!****"

Relief made laughter bubble out of my chest. "Is that a promise, bud?" I asked, before running up and leaping onto the saddle. My right hand automatically and instinctively eased onto his still slightly-wet scales and I felt the thing in my chest tear open, both of us shuddering in the relief of _he's safe _at the warmth coursing through our veins.

It was my left handâ€”the one working on autopilot to hook my latches into place on the saddleâ€”that Dad grabbed with a, "Hiccup!"

I looked up, but didn't think to remove my right hand in timeâ€”we both froze as he saw my Night Fury eyes. Toothless gave a tense growl underneath me, feeling my nerves.

But Dad didn't let go of me. I jolted out of my panic and quickly took my right hand off, but he said, "No. Noâ€”it's alright. Andâ€”

and I'm sorry." Stunned, my hand dropped, hitting scales again. He hesitated, staring for a second before continuing. "Fo-for everything. I should've listened to you."

I swallowed and nodded. "Yeah, me tooâ€"I shouldn't've lied to you, Dad."

"You wouldn't've lied if I'd listened."

"Yeah, well, you would've listened if I'd told you the truth."

Dad glanced over as the parasite roared, the volume making me wince again. "â€|Maybe."

T**his is all very touching**, Toothless suddenly broke in, ***b**ut could we please get back to the _gigantic Hel-beast_ about to flaming have us all for _NÃ³ttmal_**?"**

"Y-you don't have to go up there," Dad said, not hearing him.

Yes I did. I looked up at her, then smiled back down at him, remembering what he always said when I'd been worried he wouldn't return from a search. "We're Vikings. It's an occupational hazard," I repeated, and I could see the effect that had on him.

O**kay that's great let's _go__**!**_*

Eyes wide and bright but not with tears, Dad covered most of my entire forearm with a hand. "I'm _proud_, to call you my son."

The thrill at hearing those words started in my heart, and I felt it in my bare toes. "Th-thanks Dad," I managed as he let go of me.

***T**hat's _it_**!"**

A black ear snapped up and whacked me on the side of my face. "Ow! What in Helheim was that for?" I yelped, glaring down at the black head underneath me.

***F**or being deaf, you stupid Squish! Can we pretty please flaming _take off_ now**?"**

"I'm not deaf, I'm ignoring you, there's a very big difference." I bent my heel and his tail clicked into position, scowling slightly at the monster in front of us. ***L**et's go, bud**!"**

"_**F**__inally_**!"**

Toothless shot into the sky, flapping hard and wide to get altitude. I crouched low, streamlining us until we were almost five hundred feet high.

From way up here, it was easy to make out everything. ***U**rgh, she's uglier than I remember**,*** Toothless grumbled and I couldn't help but chuckle.

We'd missed a lotâ€"Fishlegs and the Gronkle were nowhere to be seen, and I prayed to HlÃ¡n that they were alright. The Nightmare was out

of the sky, but I saw Astrid on the Nadder by Slither and Tricky, pointing atâ€

""O""h OÃ°in's left eye, please don't let that be""|"" I strengthened the heat flowing between us and borrowed Toothless's eyes and ears for a moment.

Snotlout was _on top_ of the parasite.

Toothless laughed out loud at the sight and I groaned. We heard Astrid yell, "Get Snotlout out of there!" to the twins, and under my exasperation at my human cousin's recklessness, I smiled. She'd finally remembered to take care of the others too.

Snotlout ran along the parasite's _face_ for a second before he leapt off her nose-horn, getting caught between the Zippleback's heads.

They made it out, but fear sparked as I saw the Nadder fly just a little too closeâ€the parasite opened her jaws and drew in a massive breath, the air sucking the dragon and rider in.

""A""strid""!""

My foot clicked and his wings snapped in, bringing us into a diveâ€the wind tore at my hair and _shrieked_ as Toothless's bent wings sliced through it, making the familiar, ear-bursting ballistic _Whhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeee_â€

"Nigh' Fury!"

"Ge' down!" Gobber yelled from somewhere.

OOOOOOOOEEEEEEEEEEHHHHH

BOOM

Toothless released one of his explosive purple blasts, and with me so close, it burned white and blue on the monster's jaw.

The Nadder went spinning out of control with the force of the blast, but she had wingsâ€Astrid, who'd been thrown off, didn't.

She was plummeting towards the ground.

I didn't even have to share the thought consciouslyâ€immediate concern flashed between our minds like a spark and made us swoop up from our dive, pull wings in and push fin wide to spin around and flip upside down, nose back towards the ground.

""A""strid""!"" I screeched, Toothless joining in quickly as we zoomed towards the falling girl.

We flashed by her as she fellâ€""D""id you get her""?"" I warbled, looking around his sides.

His head ducked and popped back up. I felt his confirmation and didn't need the verbal answer he didn't bother giving.

Toothless tossed her up and we braked for half a second to let her drop easily onto the ground, before turning back to the monster still going after the ships.

We came at it from the side, and I blinked. **Toothlessâ€"that thing has wings!**

Toothless read my mind. **See if she can still use them?**

I grinned. **Let's go and piss her off a little, bud!**

Toothless's teeth gleamed in a devilish grin. My foot clicking automatically, he spread his wings wide, stopping us mid-ascent before letting us drop over backwards into another dive, spinning back upright.

Whhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeâ€"

"**H**EY EEL PARASITE**â€""** I screamed.

OOOOOOOOEEEEEEEEHHHHH

"â€"COME AND GET US YOU TROLL-FACED B!TCH**!"** Toothless finished, the thoughts and words slipping past our borders into the place where we mixed and coming out as that distinct Night Fury shriek of _about to fire_.

BOOM

The shot hit her just under the spine, and went up in a blue and white cloud of flames. She fell over on her side, the ground shaking.

We swung around. I straightened where I sat, looking behind us. **Think that did it?**

The heavy _swoop_ of wings at least 500 feet wide answered for me. Toothless snorted as he struggled to stay steady in the eddies her flapping was making.

Of course it did it, Night Fury fire **_always**_** does it!**

I ignored that and glanced over to see the huge skull coming right at us. **Well, she can still fly.**

Despite all that weight. Toothless flapped to gain speed and we rocketed into the thick fog, dancing through the black spires of rock.

We figured, together, that our size would help us hereâ€"a few hundred times smaller, we'd be able to dodge around the stacks better.

But she just slammed right through the meters of stone and rock and kept going, proving us wrong about that one.

She's still on our tail! I looked around for something new, anything new, and caught sight of the thunderclouds high above

us.

Toothless didn't even need tellingâ€”he knew what I was looking at, what I was thinking. He tilted his wings up. **I've always been the best of the dragons at disappearing!**

You think you're the best at **_everything**_**!** My ears picked up the gurgling hiss of a dragon's fire gas. **\$hit, here it comes!**

Toothless spun out of the way, just in time to avoid a long stream of blazing hot flame and magma, black smoke pouring off of it. We spun again, this time deep into the dark clouds around us.

She stopped her ascent, having lost us. Grinning as one, we swooped up and around to circle her.

So, she can fly, I thought, squinting down at the hovering and confused massive beast.

Yup.

What happens if she falls? A second, distinctly _twins_ thought came to mind as I remembered little GÃ³r and my grin widened. **While **_**exploding**_**?***

Toothless snorted darkly, picking up on my plan even as it was being formed. **Somehow, if I had to guess, I'd say the same thing that would happen to anything else.**

Well thenâ€”what're we waiting for?*

We snapped back into a firing dive, skipping on the whistle and just immediately letting a blot of fire and plasma loose onto her wing.

BOOM

She roared in pain and turned, but we were already out of there, high and above. I narrowed my eyes and we dove again, hitting her other wing before zipping right past it ourselves. The fire on the limb roared higher as I passed it, and I looked down at Toothless.

Do you even **_have**_** a shot limit?***

Let's find out!

We swept back up and dove againâ€”and againâ€”and again, firing a purple and white bolt into her back, either of her wings, her face. The parasite stayed in the air, her massive head swinging around furiously, searching for the little pest that was about to bring her down.

Suddenly, she opened that maw of hers and released an enormous ribbon of fire, head jerking back and forth to send it in every direction.

My neck prickled and I felt the heat coming up by the left finâ€”**"W**atch out**!"**

Toothless pulled in his wings and we spun out of the way, but not entirely in timeâ€”I glanced back and the left tailfin was on fire.

****On **_**fire**_**?** Toothless screamed, panickingâ€”and I couldn't blame him. ****I thought you made it out of skins so it **_**wouldn't**_** catch fire!****

****Heyâ€”**_**everything**_** can catch fire, and I wasn't exactly expecting **_**this**_** when I was making it!**** I looked back over my shoulder again, seeing the way the flames were eating through the leatherâ€”faster with every inch they burned towards me. ****Okay, time's upâ€”let's see if this works!****

Toothless went up and then rocketed down into another dive, phase two slipping into his mind from mine without a word needing to be said.

Get her attention.

The next time we dove out of the clouds, it was right at her faceâ€”as one, both sets of Night Fury eyes narrowed and gleaming, we _roared_.

"_**COME ON, THAT THE BEST YOU GOT YOU SNAKE-SLITHERING SHIT?**_"

The three eyes on the side of her head nearest locked directly onto us and she turned her head. We flew in close, zipping right through her teeth as she tried to close them on our wings, taking her second to recover to start our final dive back towards the island.

"_**Gonna have to be faster than that!**_****"

She howled, the words coming closer and closer to my understanding but still not _there_â€”my foot turned but there was barely any click, and Toothless's panic became mine.

****Stay with me buddy, we're good, just a little bit longer!****

The next time she roared, I gasped in pain as the words finally broke into my head, crossing through our shared consciousness like violent ripples in water.

"_YOU_â€”_WILL_â€”_REMEMBER_â€”_YOUR_â€”_PLACE_â€”_FATHERLESS_â€”_EEL_â€”_OF_â€”_NÃ“TT!_****_"

My eyes narrowed dangerously, anger boiling under my skin at the insult. Just like it had before, the words lifted out of my mouth without a single thought or any knowledge behind them, flying at her face like the burning embers from our disappearing tailfin.

*****You'll remember **_**yours**_**, flightless tapeworm of **_**Hel**_**!*****

The parasite opened her mouth, furious, and I saw my chance. ****Hold, Cousinâ€”!*****

Toothless growled, bringing his gas into his mouth. **Whenever you're readyâ€"!**

Hhhhhhhiiii

***N**OW**!**

Toothless flipped onto his back and lit the bolt, firing it directly into the impossible-to-miss target of the green cloud in her massive jaw.

Her eyes suddenly widened and her legs scrambled underneath her as her wings popped outâ€"

â€"only to prove absolutely useless as the flaming holes we'd punched through them burned harder with the air she was trying to catch.

Her being desperate to stop meant we were close to landâ€"we spun around and saw the beach coming up towards us, and wings snapped out fully to either side, letting us brake and spin across her side, out of the crushing zone.

**BOOOOOOM**

She hit the ground with a concussive _blast_ of fire and force that shook my brain in my skull and nearly knocked us both out of the airâ€"there was no way for her to survive it, but we weren't out of danger yet.

There was a cloud of fire starting at what had been her head and coming up fast behind usâ€"turning would take too much time and we'd be roasted, we had to go up and outrun it.

But the only way up was through her spines.

Come on, bud, just like the sea stacks!

I had two tailfins in the sea stacks! Toothless screeched, but didn't argue otherwise as we dove in and out between them, the fires successively catching more and more of her body, right on our tail.

We were halfway down her back when my foot finally didn't click at all. I glanced back and felt my stomach drop away at the sight of the leather fin burning into oblivion.

"No," I said, turning backâ€"

â€"to face the huge clubbed tail we suddenly couldn't turn away from.

"_**N**__oâ€"__**!**"

There was an impact, then pain, and nothing.

Nothing for a very long time.

* * *

><p>The sudden jarring as all the warmth in his body vanished told Toothless that Hiccup was off better than the missing weight on his back ever could.

"_**C**__ousin_**!"**

(He remembered how much of a fight he'd put up when Hiccup had first brought that saddle to the cove, even if it had turned into a race and laughter. Now he would've given his other tailfin to have his Squish back where he belonged.)

((Hiccup could make him a second fin anyway.))

Toothless spread his wings wide and let himself drop, using them to right himself since he couldn't trust his fin alone.

("_You gottaâ€"Toothless, tr-try and kinda, _angle_ yourselfâ€"|!"_)

Hiccup was terrifyingly still. Eyes closed, falling limply towards the orange, yellow, and black flames.

(Like when he'd found the boy after he'd almost drowned the first time; the fear he was feeling was exactly the same.)

Hiccup was mostly fireproof, but he'd lose every limb he had in that fire. And if that loss didn't kill him, hitting the ground underneath definitely would.

Toothless reached, flapping desperately for his cousin, trying to figure out _how_ he'd grab hold, because if he could tuck the fragile Squish under his wings, Toothless could take the fall insteadâ€"probably. He had before.

One of his legs danced into reach. Toothless screamed an apology but bit down, yanking his Squish backâ€"trying not to feel the fragile skin and flesh break and rip between his teeth or feel the bone crunch or taste the thick, warm blood spewing onto his tongueâ€"and into his waiting grasp.

Losing one leg was better than losing everything.

(Even if it was the leg he knew Hiccup used for his tailfin.)

((His cousin was _worth_ flight.))

The Night Fury closed his eyes, tucked his head in close, and, with the flames and the ground rushing up to meet them, told himself they were just falling asleep back in the cove again, both safe in the other's hold.

* * *

><p>Hey look! The cliffhanger that isn't really a cliffhanger at this point!
**

Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

****~Tibki****

23. Chapter 23

****Hey y'all!****

****I ADDED TWO CHAPTERS GO BACK A STEP. DO NOT START HERE.****

****Ready for this?****

****TW gore. Serious description ahead.****

****DISCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE_

Fog mixed with white dust and cinders in the air, making it unbreathable, choking and sticking in the throats of anyone unfortunate enough to be caught inside the cloud. It was almost a solid entity, impossible to see throughâ€”every once in a while, a dark fleck of ash would fall into your line of sight like a grieving snowflake, the only color in otherwise bleak, flat, grim-grey surroundings.

Astrid heard Chief Stoick stumbling through the dust, the same as the rest of them, his huge girth just making him more noticeable as he kicked pebbles in every direction. "Hiccup!" the man shouted into the gloom. "Hiccup! _Son_!"

"â€|_Hiccup_â€|!"

The last was said breathily, as a horrible realization, and it sent ice down her spine. She ran forward through the smog, not even caring who she kicked away or stepped on in her urgency to get _over_ there.

She couldn't hear Chief Stoick anymoreâ€”or even Hiccup, or Toothless, who surely would've been snarking or purring or crooning or warbling or whatever the Hel it was he did basically non-stop.

Why would he be silent? Now, of all times, why couldn't he be just as loud and attitude-driven as ever?

Astrid realized she didn't even know which one she was talking about, rider or dragon. Either, bothâ€”she would've done _anything_ to hear a Night Fury sound, and she didn't even care which one it came from, because if she heard one, the other would definitely be alive. She'd known them for less than two days, but she still couldn't imagine them separated.

The mist and ash slowly started to lift, blown out of the way by the constant wind that slapped into the island, the one that drove the ships into Helheim's Gate, no matter the season for the search.

She froze at the sight in front of her.

Chief Stoick was on his knees in front of a black, heaving shapeâ€”Toothless was breathing, but she couldn't see those brilliantly toxic eyes, and there was no small figure on his back.

The saddle was broken and empty.

No Hiccup.

Astrid covered her mouth as shock and horror poured through her like ice and cold fire. Her legs felt shaky, like they were losing feeling, but she managed to keep going, stumbling forward until she was farther ahead than any of the rest of the village.

She was just close enough to hear the Chief as he hung his head. "Oh son," he murmured, grief and regret heavy in his tone. "I did this."

Silence fell like a second fog over the tribe, the entire area, and Astrid felt it's crushing weight on her shoulders. Hiccup wasâ€”gone. The saddle was empty. The boy with the layers, the crooked smile and the shining, quiet bravery was justâ€”gone._

Nothing left.

A pit, black and bottomless, opened in her heart, and she wondered how she ever thought it would be amazing to die in battle, if her loved ones were left feeling like _this_. Without anyone even there to comfort them.

Ooouuu

With a weak trill, Astrid's wish for a Fury's sound was granted, but too lateâ€”Hiccup was gone, and Toothless was shaking his head, waking up. She could see him squinting, obviously exhausted.

He purred or warbled orâ€”whatever, Astrid barely cared to label it, keeping his eyes on the Chief. Chief Stoick mumbled something she couldn't hear, even from her spotâ€”but if it had been her, she would be apologizing.

Toothless's eyes opened wider, just slightly, at the wordsâ€”before his massive wings unfolded.

Thereâ€”there was a shape in there. Cocooned, _in his wings_. Wrapped tight and held close with every limbâ€”

That was _Hiccup!_

"Hiccup!" Chief Stoick shouted, stumbling to his feet and running forward. Astrid, already moving, could already see how gentle the razor-sharp claws were in pulling away when the Chief picked the boy up, one massive hand covering both his shoulders.

She arrived at his side just as he was throwing his helmet off to press an ear to his son's chestâ€”her heart stuttered for a second, but then the Chief blasted out a relieved laugh.

"Oh! He's alive! You brought him back alive!" he said, his voice cracking in pure relief and joy.

Astrid heard the othersâ€”and what sounded like the _dragons_â€”gasp and cheer behind her and felt warmth finally return to her veins. Her legs gave out and she sank to her knees behind Hiccup's head, putting a hand on his hair and swearing to herself to always watch for that brunette scalp because the gods only _knew_ what \$hit he'd get himself and them all into next time.

(Now that there'd _be_ a next timeâ€¦|)

Chief Stoick looked up at her and she wasn't too shockedâ€”though at any other time she might've beenâ€”to see tears sparkling in his green eyesâ€¦| almost the same green as Hiccup's.

The Chief held Hiccup's back with one hand and moved the other to lay it flat on the side of Toothless's head. The Night Fury mumbled something she knew only Hiccup would understand, and laid his head down, looking tired. "Thank you," the Chief said, "for saving my son."

"That's what aeries do, right?" she asked, her own voice cracking. Toothless's eyes turned to her, and the pupils blew wide. Just like he had after catching her from the Nadder's fall, he spread his lips, showing her his toothless gums in that silly grin she just _knew_ Hiccup had taught him. She grinned down at him, and glanced back at the line of teens cheering at the front of the crowd of villagers. "They save _each other_."

"Or, well, ye know," Gobber put in, coming up on the Chief's other side. He nodded, glancing once at the Night Fury before looking down at the unconscious Hiccup. "Most of 'em."

The words confused her and the Chief for a moment, before they followed his gaze down to hisâ€”

Astrid _screamed_.

* * *

><p>"A Healer! Someone get a Healer!" Stoick roared, shooting to his feet, holding Hiccup tightly to his chestâ€”Toothless's eyes opened wide and he screeched, struggling to get upright because the man's movement made Hiccup groan in pain.<p>

The sight of Hiccup's legâ€”or what was _left_ of itâ€”would haunt their nightmares for a long time to come.

The only way anyone was able to tell it was a _foot_ was because there were two stubs of toes coming off the blackened stretch of skinâ€”only the big and second littlest were left, the others gone, nothing more left than the ash in the air. Flesh and skin was black, completely dead, reeking of cooked meatâ€”a smell that no one would _never_ forget, that made the bile rise in the throatâ€”up until the ankle, which was less burnt. _If_ it was the ankle. Everything in it had been shattered and it was misshapen, gleams of hard white bone and red muscle poked through the peeling crispy surface.

His knee and a small part of his shin was relatively untouched, but underneath it was a _mess_. Even apart from the foot, there was a long stretch of leg that was blazing red, fading by a gradient into

worse burns and black, and carved with long lines that blood was
pouring through.

It didn't look like a human limb. It looked like raw ground
mutton.

Every eye that saw took it all in in that terrible detail that human
eyes only managed when absorbing something so horrific and out of
nowhere that it wouldn't settle in the mind for a long
time.

Astrid remembered how Gobber had told them about how he'd had his leg
bitten off. It had been a story then, separate from reality and their
own livesâ€"now it was _real_, too _real_, and it was _Hiccup_, and
it was _blood _and _Hiccup_ and _bone _andâ€"

"Get her out of here and get a _Healer_! _NOW!_" Stoick roared,
seeing how pale the blonde girl was becoming and feeling the blood
leave his own face at the sight of his son's limb.

Toothless caught a glimpse of the damage, quickly, and had to turn
away. He wished he wasn't too exhausted to go to the shore, because
there was a taste he was _desperate_ to wash out of his mouthâ€|

* * *

><p>Helga and Gerdy couldn't have come fast enough, and when they
caught one glimpse of Hiccup's foot, they paled as one, and Gerdy
started shouting for a fire to be built.<p>

Stoick looked around, found a flat rock, and laid his son down on it.
Hiccup's brows met and a small sound came from his throatâ€"he
couldn't tell if it was human or dragon, but Stoick didn't much care
at that point.

He only cared when Hiccup's eyesâ€"black and bruised and as gruesome
as the rest of him, but still shining greenâ€"fluttered open, shining
with pain and confusion. Of _course_ the boy would wake up; Stoick
wished he could find pride in his son's stubbornness, but now only
felt dread. "D-Dad?" he asked, his voice hoarse and weak, and then it
cameâ€"he felt his leg as Helga inspected it, prodding gently. "_Ah_!
D-Dadâ€"! "

"Sh, son, I'm here," he said. The boy tossed his head, trying to
move, and Stoick put his hands on his son's shoulders. "No, don't
move. Hiccup, keep still, you'reâ€"

He whimpered, and the sound was, Stoick realized as his words failed
him, a _mixture_. Helga's head snapped up from the wound, eyes wide,
but he glared at the Healer until she went back to her work. " 'T
hurtsâ€"m'ke it stopâ€"pleaseâ€"Dadâ€"Toothl'ssâ€" 't _hurts_â€" "

"I know son, just hold on." Though seeing his boy's eyes open was a
joy he'd never again take for granted, Stoick wished he'd go back to
sleep. There was just no way that foot would ever heal, and he'd
been _there_ for Gobber's last amputation. "Just hold oâ€" "

A soft croon broke him off, and Stoick looked to see the Night Fury
up. Its legs were trembling under its weight, and its eyes were shiny
and tired, but it had walked over to the rock. Once it was close, it

collapsed, head hitting the same surface Hiccup was on, inches from the boy's face. An exhausted breath came outâ€"air blasted out of the nostrils, ruffling Hiccup's hair.

The boy turned into the breath, whining. Stoick, bewildered and lost but realizing his son needed comfort, licked his lips and gently lifted his boy's neck, letting him press his forehead to the beast's nose.

Almost immediately, Stoick felt the skin under his hands heat up dramaticallyâ€"he would've been worried had the relief not shown openly on his son's face, his breathing steadying and deepening.

The dragon started purring. Purring. Like a bloody cat!

Around them, men were scrambling. They scattered for scrap from the ruined ships and tossed it into a pell-mell firepit.

Helga, done with her inspection looked up and met Stoick's gaze. "We can keep the knee, but the rest needs to come off," she said. Stoick nodded as she pulled off her belt and snatched a broken shaft of spear from the ground. "You'll need to hold him down."

He knew. He'd nearly lost a tooth, holding Gobber down last time. Stoick glanced at the dragon one more timeâ€"one toxic eye was peeked open. "This'll hurt him a bit," he said, unsure why he had botheredâ€"until the beast moved, never removing its nose from its place on Hiccup's head.

The Night Fury stood again and settled its paws, one for stability on the rock and the other draped across Hiccup's shoulders and chest. The eye met Stoick's again and the dragon huffed before closing it.

Stoick turned and used his own hands and weight to pin his boy's wrists and spine. He turned and met Helga's eyes, nodding.

She laid the shaft alongside the shin and looped the belt around bothâ€"Hiccup groaned. Helga glanced up one more time before she twisted the shaft hard.

Hiccup's eyes snapped open and he shrieked.

As Chief, Stoick knew, better than most, that even holding them down wasn't the hardest part: it was listening to them scream, knowing that you couldn't do anything to help them because it was that help that was hurting so bad.

The Night Fury apparently didn't know that. It pulled its head back in surprise at the soundâ€"and that very moment, Hiccup's scream turned into a shrill, echoing, Night Fury screech.

Stoick felt sick as he realized that it was the same kind of sound he'd relished in hearing from dying or injured dragons.

The Night Fury's eyes widened and it yelped before shifting its other paw, letting it touch the delicate skin of Hiccup's neckâ€"he calmed, still whimpering distressingly, but it gave the dragon enough mobility at the head to turn and growl at Helga, who'd jumped back at the sound from her patient.

"No, Toothless!"

The girl, Astrid, as washed-out pale as she'd been at her first glimpse of Hiccup's leg, jumped up from where her mother had taken her, Stoick hadn't paid any attention, holding her hands out. The Night Fury whose name was Toothless, of all things, Stoick realized, and Thor's own beard, what had possessed his son to give it a name like that looked over at her and made a distinctly worried sound.

Hiccup whimpered underneath, still trying to move. Stoick redoubled his grip and the Night Fury looked down, then back at the Healer, teeth showing as he snarled.

"Toothless!" Astrid shouted again. "Don't, she's trying to help!" It turned its head back to the girl, but ultimately buried it back into Hiccup's hair, whining helplessly. Stoick knew the feeling. "I know it's-it's hurting him but but they have to! Just just keep him calm, alright?"

Stoick heard his brother Spitelout ask her, "Why're ye speaking to it like it understands?"

At that point, Gerdy started yelling. "What use are you knuckle-headed warriors for if you can't even make a fire?" she roared.

"The wood's too wet!" someone pointed out. "It's not our fault, the sea water"

"Do I look like I give a damn about some sea water?" she snapped. "Get me a fire, we need to heat a sword and cauterize that wound!"

The Night Fury looked up. Stoick barely had time to wonder what for before it opened its mouth, a distinctive shrill hiss coming from it

"Night Fury!"

"Get down!"

and lit the pile of wood with a single well-aimed burst.

Flames roared high, steam rising as the wet wood caught fire. The others turned and stared at the dragon, who glanced over to Spitelout and sniffed before turning his attention back to Hiccup.

"Because he does understand," he heard Astrid say as Gerdy started ordering a sword and the stump-cup to be heated. "Hiccup said that all the dragons can understand us."

"And the Night Fury's the most intelligent of all the dragon species!" Fishlegs said, pointing upwards as he added his own knowledge.

The Night Fury didn't react to any of this, only whining deeply and breathing heavily into the boy's hair. Hiccup muttered something in Norse, but Stoick couldn't make out anything.

Stoick laid one arm flat across his boy's midsection, keeping him down with one forearm and cupping his cheek with the other. "Oh, my son," he muttered, knowing the calm wouldn't last.

Hiccup hummed, whining at the end but not squirming too much. But the worst was yet to come.

* * *

><p>Astrid and the other teens were ushered away when the Healers came forward with a fire-reddened sword and cup that started turning white when it got closer to Hiccup.<p>

But moving to another _island_ wouldn't've been enough to drown out Hiccup's screams and shrieks as they cut off the dead leg.

Fishlegs was covering his ears and whimpering. Snotlout looked pale as freshly fallen snow, and whiter with every fresh breath that brought a new cry for his father, or for Toothless. The twins, for the first time in Astrid's memory, were sitting close to one another, with their thighs actually _touching_, and were silent.

Astrid was jealous of them, because they didn't see his leg. His _leg_â€"she gagged, close to throwing up again.

Slowly, too slowly, the roars and sobbing vanished, leaving only the occasional whimperâ€"anything else, they were too far away to hear.

"Oh gods, is it over?" Fishlegs asked, peeking his eyes open.

"Yeah," Ruffnut grunted, her eyes glued to the fire and shapes moving around a rock in the distance.

Toothless hadn't moved from his spot at Hiccup's head yet. Some part of Astrid hoped he never would, because it obviously gave Hiccup some amount of comfort.

Gobber strode out from the pack around the rock and went over to the fire, throwing a small, linen-wrapped _thing_ into it. The fire flared and ate it hungrily, and when Astrid realized what it was, she _did_ throw up.

At fifteen years old, most Vikings were getting ready to be on their own. Girls were preparing to be married or choosing suitors, boys were picking up axes or other professionsâ€"some other girls were doing the same, actually. They were far from the heads of the households, but they'd be in charge of more things, have more responsibility and, maybe, in just a couple of years, they'd build their own homes and start a family. Fifteen was the end of childhood and the early dawn of adulthood, when the sun wasn't up _just_ yet but the sky was lightening.

Since her fifteenth winter began, Astrid counted herself as an adult, a strong, proud shield-maiden.

But not until she'd seen old Gobber, nearly fifty with his one leg and his one hand, hobble over to that fire to _throw away_ one of

Hiccup's limbs, did she realize how young they still all were. No one under twenty had been allowed to come on the raid; they were children amongst experienced warriors here, even if they'd been the ones to really tip the scales.

All the men (and women) in the village who were newly missing limbs were in their thirties or forties, the youngest being a 32-year-old who'd dropped an axe cutting wood and sliced off half his foot last summer—he was now the youngest besides Hiccup, still a teenager and now maimed for life.

Later, she would clout anyone who called Hiccup maimed, or crippled, or anything like it, because that wound was a badge of honor, proof of the immensity of his act of bravery. But now, in her fear, in her shock, the hated thought came from her own dark mind.

And then one even worse popped up as she wiped her mouth, and she paled. Would he still—?

The group of Healers and men around Hiccup broke up, and though Chief Stoick pulled away, he didn't move off, instead falling to sit heavily on the beach, his back to the teenagers. Figuring it safe now, Astrid stood, wiped her mouth again, and glanced back at her group.

"The chief needs to know."

The others looked up, all meeting her eyes. Fishlegs, however, was the only one that stood, nodded, and followed when she walked towards the stone table.

"Health and happiness, Chief Stoick," she said when she reached him.

Chief Stoick was keeping one hand wrapped around Hiccup's wrist, dwarfing it and the chest it was lying on. He looked up and met her eyes, nodding. "I wish you happiness as well, Astrid, Fishlegs, but all my thoughts for health are going to my son."

They both nodded, understanding. Hiccup was asleep, his eyebrows scrunched together in residual pain and his mouth still releasing mutters and the occasional whine. Whenever he did, Toothless, still keeping his head in Hiccup's hair, would croon back. The boy's other hand—the one Stoick wasn't holding—was curled around the dragon's paw, pulling tightly in tandem with his whimpers of pain.

Astrid looked over him and couldn't decide which part to focus her gaze on—every part of Hiccup's body was as bad as the rest. His face—gods his face, usually thin and round and freckled but otherwise pale and clear. Now bruised every color of the rainbow, with minor cuts and slices across his cheeks and nose, a few scrapes, and the distinctive puncture wounds. The only reason she could pick them out, though, was because she knew where they were; otherwise the blood, ash, and especially the stretch of bruising from his matching set of black eyes would've hidden them from view.

Astrid realized then that she didn't even know where they'd come from—the first had been old, but the second she'd only seen after getting him from the cell. One more thing to add to Mildew's

crimes,_ she figured with a snarl.

The Healers had bound the slices the Nightmare had put in his shoulder and side, which had been ignored back on Berk, and there were wrappings around his arms where she figured he'd been burnt by that same dragon. His shirt was rumpled, like they'd taken it off then put it back on with the bandages underneath, but otherwise they hadn't removed of his clothes, only rolled or cut off the sleeves and legs as needed. Astrid could see brown stains of human blood on his tunic, dark splotches of Toothless's dragon blood on the thigh, and black soot and scorch marks everywhere between.

Looking at the bloodstains at his thigh dragged her gaze down. The knee, like she'd seen before, was relatively untouchedâ€”a few red lines of minor burns, that possibly wouldn't even scar. There _would_ be scarring and scoring, though, on the shin, and then the leg ended.

As if he hadn't been through enough.

It laid, unwrapped in bandages, on a cloth spread on the rock. "Um, are they sure that's sanitary?" Fishlegs asked, pointing.

"They need to make sure the pus drains out." Astrid could see stitches of catgut puckering the skin in places, but made sure to look away before any pus could be seen. Chief Stoick sighed, and squeezed his son's hand. "The Healers thought he had a fever but Iâ€”I don't think it is one."

Astrid frowned and put her hand on Hiccup's arm. The muscles were trembling with pain, but the heat radiating off him was one she recognized. "No, you're right," she said, making both the Chief and Fishlegs stare. "It's not a fever. He always gets like this when he'sâ€”"

She stopped, realizing they _still_ didn't have a name for it.

And for some reason, that was suddenly hilarious. Astrid broke into giggles, then laughter, and the others' surprised and worried faces just made her laugh harder.

She laughed and laughed until she cried, and then the tears were all that was coming, rolling down her cheeks, embarrassing and unstoppable.

"â€”_zzztr_ehhh_dâ€—_"

The sound, half a word and half a whine, made her freeze. Hiccup's eyes were rolling underneath his lids, and he wasn't awake, but there was no denying he'd said it. In his delirium, he'd heard her hysterics and tried to say her name.

She looked back up, still sniffing, and colored deeply at the sympathetic look Chief Stoick was giving her. "It's been a hard day for a lot of us," he said, but then dropped the subject, and she'd never been more grateful. "He doesn't have a fever?"

Astrid nodded, casually brushing her hair off her face and if that took the tears off too, it was a happy coincidence. "He and Toothless have this thingâ€”they don't have a name for it. I think _consensual

two-way possession_ was the only thing they could come up with." The Chief stared at her, then closed his eyes and pinched the brow of his nose, probably gaining a quick headache. Hiccup had a tendency of causing those. "They never really explained it further than that, but I've seen it, and it makes Hiccup really, uh, warm."

"You've seen it?" he repeated, looking up. "Astrid, you _knew_ about all of this?" She nodded. The Chief sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face.

Astrid knew that leading a tribe of Vikings wasn't an easy job. _Everyone_ knew leading a tribe of Vikings wasn't an easy job; they were violent and bloodthirsty by nature, and disputes were common even inside the closest of friendships. It took a special combination of patience and stubbornness to do it well. The best chiefs were men who were willing to listen to both sides of every story, who knew when to let the two conflicting personalities work it out themselves, and, above all, who knew when they just had to smash stupid heads together to get them all to _shut up_.

Chief Stoick the Vast of the Hairy Hooligan tribe of Berk, Hear His Name and Tremble, Ugh, Ugh, wasn't just a good chief. He was an _excellent_ chief.

{The Haddocks, by the way, were well-known for their _brilliant_ Viking full names. Including Hiccup's. _Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, the Hope and Heir to the Tribe of the Hairy Hooligans of Berk._}

{{Not a few had argued against such a scrawny boy having such a great name; somehow, she doubted they'd be speaking up again anytime soon.}}

Astrid could see the Chief's mind working fast and hard behind that skull, and could also now see where some of that intelligence and sharp-mindedness in Hiccup had come from.

"Alrigh' then," the Chief said, looking up into the sky, which had started darkening with NÃ³tt's arrival. "Gobber an' Spitelou' are working on wrestlin' up a big fire, and setting up an overnight camp. We're not getting ou' o' here until tomorrow, at best. You lot an' the other teenagers help ou' if ye can, and we'll hold a village meetin' right there, before bed. Ye'll tell everyone everything, then."

Astrid lifted her chin and nodded. It was a rare instance, for a young Viking to be brought into the center of attention at a village meetingâ€"even an impromptu one like thisâ€"and she would do it with dignity and grace.

(She'd have to warn the Chief or Gobber, once they were alone, that she knew about Hiccup's grandfather being Thor.)

"Waitâ€"Chief, what about dinner?" Fishlegs asked, a typical question for him.

Chief Stoick looked at him flatly. "Fishlegs, if there isn't enough food on _Berk_, d'ya really think we'll be able to find enoughâ€"?"

At his words, a warble came from the black dragon at Hiccup's head. Toothless's head lifted from the rock—he kept a paw on his shoulder, scales touching the fragile skin of his neck—and looked at the Chief, then at Astrid.

"Uh— is something wrong, Toothless?" she asked, unsure about how to react to this.

Toothless hummed at her before turning his neck up. He made some kind of noise—a call, but very different from the one Hiccup had made to try and find him during the battle—and, a few moments later, the Nadder Astrid had ridden to the island landed nearby.

She stared as the dragon met Toothless's gaze, but stayed a respectful distance away. The Nadder and Night Fury seemed to have a conversation of growls and qualls, before she took off again, squawking into the air.

Toothless turned back to the humans surrounding him, and specifically looked at Chief Stoick. He blinked once, slowly, and then put his head back on Hiccup's.

"What was that about?" Fishlegs wondered.

"I have no idea," Astrid answered honestly.

* * *

><p>They found out maybe half an hour later, when the four Ring dragons suddenly appeared not too far from the base camp the Vikings were building. The crowds of warriors, still not very comfortable with the creatures, had tensed—until they all dropped huge mouthfuls of fish onto the shore, putting the piles directly in front of the teenagers who'd ridden them and looking proud while doing so.<p>

"What. In. Niflheim," Snotlout gagged, grimacing at the slightly slimed fish.

"That is so _gross_!" Ruffnut exclaimed. "And _cool_!" she added, with her brother joining her exactly.

The Nadder ducked her head and nosed most of a fish forward. Hesitantly, and with not a small amount of disgust, Astrid picked up the fish with two fingers. "Uh—what do you want me to do with this?"

The dragon blinked at her. She turned around, like she was looking for something until she saw where Toothless and Hiccup had been moved—onto a piece of flat wood, close to the fire.

The Nadder squawked. Toothless looked up and grumbled, but stood and ambled over. It was the first time he'd strayed from Hiccup's side, and he only did so after snuffling carefully into the boy's hair, making certain he'd be safe for just the few moments.

Any Viking not actively working—and a few that should've been—stopped to stare as Toothless nudged the Nadder out of the way and gently took the fish from Astrid's hand. The Night Fury put it on an expanse of ground that wasn't covered in pebbles—solid rock,

ratherâ€"and sparked a steady, constant violet-white flame.

After a few moments, the smell of cooked fish filled the air, and Astrid felt her own jaw hang loose when Toothless presented it back to her.

"Y-youâ€| you cooked dinner?" she asked, barely able to believe what she'd just seen. The fish was warm on her hands and smelledâ€| well, wonderful, especially to a girl who hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"No' jus' that!" Gobber yelled. "They caught' dinner!" He limped up to one of the piles and used a sword to spear a few, lifting them high. "We're no' goin' hungry tonight!"

It took a lot of persuasion and grumbling stomachs to convince some of the warriors, but eventually, every last one of them had either shared a large fish or had a small one of their own.

The teens were sat as close as was comfortable to the immense fire, grilling their fish and watching in amazement as the dragons they'd ridden settled in for the night beside them. Snotlout's Nightmare had even thumped him on the head when he'd put down the last of his fishâ€"forced him to finish the meal, like a concerned parent!

The fire itself was more of the bon- than the camp- version, burning through the useless or mangled pieces of wood that they wouldn't be able to use for salvage or to repair the ships for the return journey. It was probably a good twenty feet in diameter, and rose high into the sky, spitting heat better than a Nightmare.

The crowd of warriors were spread in an unclosed circle several people deepâ€"the unconnected parts housed the teenagers and dragons. With the fire in front and the smoldering carcass of the parasite behind, and with the Vikings tightly packed together, none of the crowd were cold; with the fire in front and some curiously protective dragons behind, none of the teenagers were either.

The ones closest to the fireâ€"the nearest part of the flames blazing higher than it did anywhere elseâ€"were Hiccup and Toothless. The Night Fury had taken a few cod to eat, because Astrid remembered what Hiccup had told her in the Ring's tunnel about his favorite foods, and had grumbled when she and Gobber had struggled to work out how to take the destroyed tack off, but had otherwise fallen right to sleep, obviously exhausted from his fast-paced flight and final landing.

Toothless was curled tightly around the sprawled Hiccup, whose leg had finally been bandagedâ€"after a moment of pure disgust when the Night Fury had licked the stump, though the action did seem to have given Hiccup some measure of relief from painâ€"his head laid next to his cousin's and his tail wrapped around the boy's other side.

"Are ye ready, Astrid?" the Chief asked, once everyone had settled into a sitting position. It was impossible to know how many of the 200-some men and women were already asleep or wouldn't be able to hear, but word could travel fast among a group of Vikings, so they weren't too worried about anyone being left out.

Astrid nodded, and the Chief stood, getting everyone's attention. "I

know you all must have plenty of questionsâ€”I do too. But with Hiccup unconscious, we can't get a lot of answers out of him. These kids, though, know something of what has been going on over the past few weeks, of what led us to this point.

"I know it's not exactly the Viking way, but I at least need to hear this informationâ€”and if you want your questions answered, you do too. So being quiet would be best, until Astrid's finished her story. Astrid?"

The girl nodded, looking into the fire for words.

"I guess everything started six weeks ago, when Hiccup said he'd shot down a Night Fury and none of us believed himâ€”"

* * *

><p>The others jumped in where they could, but it wasn't much, since she'd been the one to really experience the most out of them. Mostly, they listened to Astrid talk, either watching her, the sleeping dragon and boy, or the fire.<p>

There were a few times they had solid things to add. When Astrid reached the Zipplebackâ€”the first of his many successes in the Ringâ€”Fishlegs had quietly interrupted, telling them about how Hiccup had started writing everything he'd discovered into the Manual, how he'd probably brought an eel into the Ring and scared it back.

A couple times, whenever anything the teens dropped in were such _typical_ situations for Hiccup or the twins or anyone to get into, some of the adults had some kind of reaction. The Terror and Tuffnut's description of his nose's abuse (bite _and_ punch) had gotten them to laugh; Ruffnut had told them about the morning practice that Hiccup had saved from being her last, and some murmurs broke out when she realized he would've had to have, well, _run_ to reach her in time.

When Astrid got to her own disastrous first flight, there had been uncomfortable mutters in a few directions, but Astrid had glared at them and kept going. After all, that chaotic flight had smoothed out into theâ€”she never said _romantic_ (out loud)â€”ride that had impressed her so much. She described in detail how they'd interacted, the shared sarcasm and the light slaps and thumps they'd exchanged, earning more chuckles from the crowd.

She'd hesitated, because it seemed like such a personal thing, but hadn't really seen a way around it when she reached their _consensual two-way possession without all the negative connotations_. {Astrid had had to break the words down after realizing that a good majority of her audience, and three of her four friends, had no idea what any of that meant.} She'd tried to dampen down the weirdness of their unified movements, but there were still uncomfortable looks on their faces, so she sped through that part, excepting the moment where they'd seen the parasite for the first time.

{Astrid took it as a victory that the Chief didn't start trying to tear Toothless's head off the moment he heard what happened between them. The man did turn an interesting shade of white, though.}

It had been almost two hours before she started wrapping the story up. The fire was lower, embers and ashes in a ring and a few flames in the center, smoke drifting high.

"We found Hiccup and he had the idea"the absolutely crazy and unthinkable and, well, _Hiccup_ idea"to ask one of the dragons to give him a ride over here, to keep you all from getting killed by the parasite."

Astrid laid a hand on the Nadder, who didn't lift her head from its spot on the ground at her side but opened an eye to look at her. "He was planning on setting them all free and taking the Nadder alone, but we wanted to come too. He talked them all down, and with the rest of us on dragonback, he ran over the water to get here.

"You all saw the rest," she finished, grateful to give her voice a small break. She accepted the bladder of water Snotlout handed her, and swallowed gratefully. She wasn't sure how many people had fallen asleep during her story, but that at least those in her line of sight had been listening intently.

"Wait"he _ran_ _over water_" the Chief asked, at once impressed and pale. "That's _possible?_"

"Apparently," Snotlout answered, waving a hand. At some point, he'd relaxed and was currently leaning against the red hide of the Nightmare. "Cause he _did_ it."

Gobber scoffed from his place sitting between the Chief and Astrid. He seemed to have not one single qualm with the dragons so nearby. "Can't ye see, Stoick, 't's jus' like 'im!" he said, gesturing to the sleeping Hiccup with his false hand. "Prob'ly neva even though' abou' the little nugge' tha' he can't swim"jus' ran righ' over an entire ocean!"

The Chief blinked at this, and then rubbed at his forehead like another headache had come on. Astrid sympathized.

"Looked like he'd done it before," Ruffnut shrugged. She and her brother were lounging against their respective heads of the Zippleback, laid out almost flat against the scales.

"Yeah, and he was running for like an hour and never got tired!" Tuffnut added.

Gobber glanced over to the Chief, before shrugging himself. "We never did ge' ta test 'is stamina with th' runnin'," he admitted.

"What I want to know," Snotlout's dad Spitelout said, aiming a frown at his older brother, "is _why_ his abilities were kept secret from his own _family_."

"_And_ the rest of the village," another woman, Hilda the Heavy it looked like, added, crossing her arms.

Mumbles passed through the crowd, but before Stoick could think of something to say, Astrid stood.

It was the first time since she'd sat down two hours ago, so her legs tingled at the movement, but she didn't let it show. Instead, she met

the eyes on her steadily before saying, never looking down, "You want to know why he never told anyone? Fine.

"After you left, we didn't find Hiccup just like that. It wasn't easy. He wasn't just hanging around doing nothing like we all thought he always did. We spent a day and a night trying to find him."

"Oh, man, we looked over that entire island!" Tuffnut groaned, dropping away from the dragon and falling flat on the ground in exhaustion at the memory.

"Like, all of the houses and half of the woods!" Ruff agreed. She scowled, "And no one would help us, either!"

"Yeah!" Snotlout added, sitting up and scowling as well. "They were all like why do you want to know and who'd be looking for that old nuisance, and we were working hard! I never do that, except for training!"

"Someone actually spit on my face!"

"Uh," Fishlegs broke in, "Tuff, that was because you called Eira the Hairy a man."

Tuffnut shot vertical again. "Wait, that was a girl? But she had such a luscious mustache!" Fishlegs shrugged, not able to deny the point.

"The only one who was willing to help us," Astrid cut in, her voice overpowering the others, "was Elder Gothiâ€"Hiccup's own grandmother. She was the only one who cared enough to tell us that Hiccup had been thrown into the dungeons."

The news rippled shock through the crowd of Vikings. Spitelout's jaw hung loose, then clenched at the insultâ€"the same anger that had filled his sonâ€"and even Astrid's mother's eyes narrowed dangerously. Those cells were for monsters no longer considered human, and though Astrid shared their anger, she scowled.

"Would any of you have argued against it, if all of this hadn't just happened?" she barked, gesturing widely to the parasite's smoldering carcass. "Without knowing that he was brave and good enough to save you all, even after you'd taken his dragon away from him? If you didn't know that about him, would you have fought for him at all, the boy who could speak to dragons?"

The crowd silenced, many eyes wide at the anger in the girl's statementâ€"and the truth they were disturbed to find underneath.

"Astrid."

The Chief's voice was nearly silent, and the fury inside of it sent terrified shivers down her spine. She swallowed and looked over at the manâ€"his green eyes were hard as emerald, unforgiving and cold. Unnerved, Astrid hoped to every god she knew Hiccup's weren't able to turn that color. "Who?"

"We don't know for certain," Fishlegs quickly said, stepping

forward.

Astrid scowled, anger flaring and burning away her nonplus at Stoick's expression. "But I have a feeling it was Mildew. He did nearly beat Hiccup's brains out with his staff, back in the Ring." The Chief's eyes narrowed and he nodded tensely, remembering. "I don't think he did it alone, though. He's too old and frail to hold down even a 90-pound boy while chaining him up_ andâ€"andâ€"! "

She bit her words off, not wanting to lose her temper in front of so many. She took a careful, slow breath, and then faced the tribe again.

"Who here knows the tale of Brokk and Eitri?"

"Now isn't the time for tales, girl," Spitelout scowled. Astrid gave him a level look.

"No," she agreed. "It isn't. So let me say it quickly. Once upon a time, Loki needed a craft done, and had it completed by the sons of Ivaldi. He was so pleased by the work, that he claimed them to be the best of smiths. He said that there was no one who could surpass them, nothing that could best their abilities. He made an amazing, unbelievable claim.

"Brokk and Eitri, dwarves and brothers, overheard and grew jealous. They didn't believe Lokiâ€"and honestly, why would they? Loki'd caused enough trouble over his lifetime." She gestured to Hiccup. "Loki had lied before. Why would anyone believe useless little Loki when he made such a huge claim?"

"So Brokk and Eitri made a wager that they could create something even better than what the sons of Ivaldi had managed. They made three glorious objectsâ€"a ship, a spear, and Mj  lnir itself. But when they made Mj  lnir, something went wrongâ€"and the handle was cut short. It was imperfect. So Loki was proven right.

"But Brokk wasn't happy about it. Any guess as to what he did?"

Lardstongue broke in, sounding loud and impatient as always. "Everyone knows this story, Astrid," he said. "What does this have to do with Hiccup?"

"Hiccup is Loki in this story," she explained, not entirely surprised that she had to break it down for the tribe. "Loki in the story is Hiccup if he'd decided to come clean about his Gifts. No one would've believed himâ€"and when he was proven to be telling the truthâ€"| "

Chief Stoick turned pale as freshly fallen snow. "Theyâ€"theyâ€"| "

Astrid turned and faced her Chief seriously, before kneeling next to the boy and his dragon. Toothless, one eye open, watched her carefully but allowed her to slip a finger into his mouth and lift his upper lip.

The Chief collapsed heavily beside her, eyes wide and horrified as

she pressed her fingers gently on top of one of the piercings, turning the skin white as the blood was chased out of the area. Hiccup flinched and mumbled at the pain, but when the blood flooded back into the skin, it beaded crimson on the single point.

Chief Stoick seemed too shocked to move, so Astrid stood back up, and glared at the tribe as a whole.

"Hiccup said something the tribe back on the island didn't want to hearâ€”he called for his Câ€| for Toothless. He called for the only person who'd protected him, who would listen to him, in the only way he knew how. But they didn't want to hear those sounds. _So his tribe sewed his lips together._"

The sheer _horror_ of the act shocked everyone still.

Astrid was breathing heavily with the exertion of keeping herself together, but it wasn't working very well. "They beat him like an animal!" she shouted. "And when they were done with that, they took away his voice, the only thing that makes a man human! They held him down, and they shoved a needle through his skin, again, and again, and _again_!"

"And you know what the worst part is?" she asked, heat growing behind her eyes in sheer fury. "It's not what happened to him, though that's a close second. It's not that we couldn't stop it. It's that we _didn't bother_. _"

"We all heard them calling for one another, we _all_ heard how desperate they were, and we _all_ _heard_ when Hiccup got _silenced_! But _nobody_ bothered to find out why! Maybe it was because you had a bigger goal in mindâ€”or maybe it was because you simply didn't _care_, what happened to the freak scrawny bit of a boy who could talk to dragons!"

She was screaming nowâ€”dam# the consequences, dam# her reputation as a calm, collected warrior in front of the tribe, _dam#it_, they'd all had a hand in this. They all needed to hear this, because there was no other way they'd understand the anguish their smallest must've gone through.

"You wanna know why he never said anything about his powers? He only told me _part_ of the reason to my faceâ€”he said that he didn't want to be _judged_ by people he _cared_ _about_ for anything except himselfâ€”but he was actually _terrified_! Of his own _village_! His _tribe_! _Because he was afraid you would've turned your backs on him at the drop of the hat and left him for deadâ€”and he was right to be afraid, because_ _you did!_"

Her chest was heaving, and there were tears in the corners of her eyesâ€”she had to stop, at least for a moment. She glanced at Fishlegs to continue the short part up until they'd left the Ring, and wiped at her face, looking and feeling disgustedâ€”at her tears, at their actions, at the world itself.

Another glance, this one back to Hiccup, showed her thatâ€”aw, Hel, Toothless was _awake_. The Night Fury was watching her with a slitted, angry eye, but she knew the anger wasn't for her.

Before Fishlegs could say a word, a horrible, deep growl exploded

from the unholy creature.

Every single body tensed as the black head rose, eyes narrowed into furious slits, glaring fire and death upon them all. Even Chief Stoick stumbled back and away from the angry dragon. The terror thankfully lasted only a moment, but was enough to remind everyone that he was both close by and dangerous.

Part of the reason they were just okay with the Nadder, and the Zippleback, and the Gronkle and Nightmare was because they knew how to handle those beasts. They had handled them before. But no one had ever seen a Night Fury before now, much less taken one down.

(The only one who ever had was lying unconscious, safe in his claws.)

But he didn't fire into the crowd, or launch himself at them. Instead, what he did was turn back down to the small body by his side, eyes softening.

Tenderly, Toothless nosed under Hiccup's head and grabbed his collar with his teeth. He tugged, being impossibly gentle as he pulled the boy into a waiting, four-legged embrace.

The dragon wrapped his massive wings around them both, looked up and growled at the crowd once more, showing off sharp teeth, then ducked his head under to join Hiccup and was silent.

Fishlegs took his chance to start talking, and Astrid took her moment to pull herself together and let her throat recover from speaking non-stop for two hours.

Gobber limped up to her. "â€|Did tha' dragon just kidnap Hicca with a hug?" Gobber asked her quietly, eyebrows high. "Huh."

Astrid looked at him, their conversation unheard as Fishlegs talked to the crowd and the Chief. "No," she said, for his ears only, looking him directly in the eye. "Toothless took his cousin away from those who almost killed him."

" 'is cousin?"

Her lips pressed together. She would've smirked, but it didn't feel right. "C'mon Gobberâ€|unholy offspring of lightning and death itself, right?" He nodded, not understanding. "Night Furies aren't born, they're made. By Hel and Thor."

She felt the old man stiffen beside her, and kept her gaze on the cocooned pair in front. "Hiccup showed me his birthmarkâ€|realized he couldn't explain the whole Dragonese thing away without admitting it. You heard it, it's not just another languageâ€|those sounds aren't human. He called it a Gift, from his grandfatherâ€|the fire-thing and the running too." Astrid hesitated and glanced up at him, that second horrible thought from the afternoon coming back to mind. "I've already promised not to say a word, but Gobberâ€| do you think he'll everâ€| run again?"

The old blacksmith sighed and patted her shoulder, suddenly looking much, much older. "Walk, sure. Run like th' best of us, prob'lyâ€|"I migh' have an inklin' an' an old sketch o' a prosthesis of 'is tha'

might do th' trickâ€"but run like 'is gran'father taught 'im?" He shrugged. "Only time will tell."

Astrid and the Nadder had flown down close to him, when they'd started off Berk towards the island. She'd seen the peace on his face as he ran, the open joy. It was the first time she'd seen him that happy.

She realized it was also probably the first time in his life he'd run without worrying about who saw, or that he'd run out of space. He'd been a natural-born runner, trapped on a small islandâ€"at that moment, he'd been freed, and the elation of that freedom had shone from his face like rays of SÃ³l.

"I hope he will."

"Aye, me too."

They were both quiet for a moment before a low, almost thoughtful voice spoke up. Chief Stoick had walked up beside them, gaze off in the distance. "Once we ge' back to th' village," the Chief said, the words growled. His jaw was squared as he ground his teeth together, and he was pale white in fury. His mind was back on Berk, already starving for vengeance, and his eyes were hard. "I think I'll be needin' to have a _talk_ with _Mildew_."

As hard as his tense muscles and eyes were, Chief Stoick's voice was soft and frightening, and Astrid felt scared and satisfied at the same time. And when she saw Toothless look up and his eyes narrow at the name, she could almost tell what the dragon was thinking.

You're second in line behind me.

* * *

><p>Well? How was it? I hope you liked it!

So yeah, in case you missed the symbolism when I first wrote it in, here it is written out-Hiccup was in a dark place at the beginning of the movie, trapped as something less than Viking, barely human, and the tribe, in not listening to him, took away his voice and left him only with sarcasm that everyone was deaf to anyway. This is mirrored by the cell and the stitches. The stitches also connect directly to Loki who, as we learned last chapter, is of a kind with Hiccup. Not only is the story connecting them, but also, there's the fact that _no one would've believed_ Hiccup was the grandson of Thor; they would've believed him to be lying, and then to be a child of Loki if he decided to prove it, before ever bringing Thor into the picture. So they'd give him a punishment fitting of Loki, if they didn't just ship him off.

I did have to change (rather, leave out) bits and pieces of the Brokk and Eitri myth for it to work. Sorry about that. You can read up on the original myth yourselves, if you're curious, but please keep in mind that the original doesn't serve as good an analog for Hiccup as this version.

**Most of you have assured me, and I thank you all, lovelies, but I must restate it: please don't shoot me if updates lag for the next

five days. I'm re-starting college life and there's medical bills to pay and books to get and a summer course test to take and... urgh. So much shist.**

PEACE,

~Tibki

24. Chapter 24

Hey y'all!

~Yzma voice~ I bet you weren't expecting... THIS!

** ~Purple curtains snap back to reveal... chapter 24!~ I know, a lot better than what some of you were thinking. ;) It wasn't easy, but I managed to scrape something together nonetheless.
>

To be honest, I started it yesterday, so I only barely managed to find time to edit this puppy today, even though it wasn't a full chappie, but it's ready. As for next chapter... worst case scenario, Saturday. :)

I've gotta leave for a meeting for work in like ten minutes, though, so I won't be able to reply to the lovely review you've left or the PM you've sent me, my lovelies-just give me a day or two, and I'll get to those, promise!

Hope you like it!

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR_

It wasn't easy getting everyone back to Berk. The hundreds of stupid squishes who'd come trying to take down the parasite couldn't fly, or swim the distance back to their own Nest, and many of theirâ€|strangely shaped pieces of driftwood were now sitting at the bottom of the brine by the shore.

(Toothless knew Hiccup wouldn't be impressed with him calling _all_ of them stupid squishes, but Toothless wasn't feeling very sympathetic to them at this point.)

His Squish's sire was the first to rise the morning after Astrid told what she knew of their storyâ€"whoever this _Mildew_ person was, Toothless had decided that the squish had earned a slow, painful death under his clawsâ€"and when he did rise, he went right to Toothless.

His big hand, hesitantly, settled on Toothless's head. It wasn't warm the way Hiccup's hands were, or small and gentle, but the rough calluses didn't feel _bad_ and it was warm in its own way.

"Can I see him?" he asked.

Toothless watched him for a moment before unfurling. Hiccup had, over the night, barely movedâ€"an echo of a nightmare had crossed their connection into Toothless's side a few hours ago, but when Toothless had crooned and let Hiccup's special warmth fill them both, the tense shoulders had eased.

Right now, Hiccup was pressed tight into Toothless's chest, his hands wrapped close around his neck. Toothless nosed at the boy's uninjured shoulder. **Come on, Cousin, you've got to let go for a bit.**

Hiccup was too deeply out of it for conscious thought, but Toothless felt his reluctance anyway. Sensing feelings that weren't his own was his rockâ€"it told him Hiccup was still inside that far-too-fragile head of his. But as much as they steadied him, he'd heard his Squish's sire and those strange hurt-to-help women who hadâ€"taken, the leg. They'd said something about a _fever_.

Dragons didn't get _fevers_. He didn't even know what a _fever_ was. Toothless, without Hiccup there, was without an explanation and very worried. So, even though he didn't want to, just as much as Hiccup didn't him want to, he retracted his teeth and used gentle gums to peel his cousin off of him.

Once the tiny Squish was laid out on the ground, Toothless stood and licked his hair onceâ€"he knew Hiccup hoped and prayed that he would never ask him to lick him back, which was ridiculous, because the last thing he wanted was a _Squish_ _tongue_ on _his scales_â€"before drawing back enough for the large man to be comfortable coming forward.

His Squish's father put his hands on Hiccup's head, his cheek, then laid one flat against his chest. "He's warm," the man rumbled, and he sounded worried.

Toothless whined, and now his confusion was settling into fear. To dragons, warm meant good, warm meant the fire inside was alive and strongâ€"but squishes couldn't breathe fire, they had no inner flame. Did warm mean bad to themâ€"? Was warm bad to _Hiccup_, who, despite having an inner flame of his own in his chest, was still very much a squish?

Fires above, had he hurt Hiccup _more_, by keeping him close and warm all night?

He didn't get an answer. Instead, the rest of the mass of squishes were waking up, kicking one another and calling each other lazy, and the sire got their attention quickly onto the _ships_ that needed rebuilding.

The father also directed the two women and one skinny man from earlier back to Hiccup. They didn't come forward with another white-hot squish claw, but Toothless still growled at them for good measure.

Maybe they _had_ been helping, but he'd had his own nightmare last nightâ€"and it had involved the way their hands had made his cousin _scream_.

The way their hands had taken off his cousin's _leg_.

The squishes were more careful moving around him after that, poking at his cousin and mumbling under their breaths, things he barely caught. There were frowns over their faces, the ridiculous scraps of fur meeting over their eyes.

"I need is back on Berk," he heard, and his ears straightened.

"What do you mean?" he asked, stepping forward, not even remembering or caring that they wouldn't understand. All three squishes froze at his movement, and any other time he'd be proud of the effect just his presence could have. Now, though, was no time for pride—he wanted answers. "What's on Berk? What in Thor's name are you talking about?"

"Toothless!"

His name made him look up, and he saw Astrid jogging forward. Finally, someone who couldn't well, not understand him, but out of these hundreds of useless squishes, at least this one might realize what he wanted.

He lifted his head over to her and whined, "Please, please tell me what these idiots can't seem to manage! What's wrong with my cousin?"

He knew she didn't get the words, but at least something transferred. Astrid looked between him, the other squishes, and Hiccup, and turned to the adults. "Is something wrong with Hiccup?"

"He has a fever," one of them replied. Astrid paled, and Toothless's fear spiked, but the woman held out a calming hand. "Nothing serious yet, but it could be an early sign of infection. The last thing this boy needs is for the rot to get into that stump."

The rot? That was impossible—he'd licked that stump clean!

But he couldn't explain that to them.

"(Is something wrong with the little Squish Prince?)"

The Nadder, which had attached herself to Astrid's side this morning, lowered her head towards Hiccup. Toothless, still lost and borderline panicked about his cousin, snapped his head towards her and hissed.

"Put that head any closer and you'll lose it!"

The Spine-Shooter drew back sharply, eyes wide and head low in respect and fear. Toothless bared his teeth until she backed away more, then huffed and laid down at Hiccup's head with a whine.

He'd never felt so useless. He and his cousin had taken down the monster that had been plaguing their Nest for longer than Toothless had been alive, but now a different battle was being fought, and Hiccup had to do it alone.

"Please be okay, you stupid Squish," Toothless moaned, putting his nose into Hiccup's shoulder. "I don't know what I

would do without you**."**

He closed his eyes, but heard the squishes talking. "Like a loyal dog to its master," someone said, and normally, he would've torn their head off for that, but his head was in a more important spot right now.

"Toothless isn't a pet," Astrid hissed, sounding insulted on his behalf. "He's just as intelligent as any human, and Hiccup is his family. A dragon's family is his aerie, and that's the loyalty you're seeing here. Not a dog's."

Toothless peeked one eye open, seeing the furious expression on the girl's face and the power and grace she held in that small squish body.

Alright, he begrudgingly admitted, pointedly ignoring the fact that he wouldn't get an answer, **maybe your taste in females isn't as horrible as I thought.**

She's still eaten way too many rotten fish.

* * *

><p>By the time they reached Berk again, on the four boats they'd managed to salvage or patch together, Hiccup's cheeks were flushed and there was a thick sheen of sweat over his brow. When Stoick laid his hand on his son's body, the boy almost felt as hot as he was when that dragon was touching him.<p>

The Healers were concerned about over-heating, about the damage it would do to Hiccup's mind. Stoick knew that if he could stand the heat of a dragon's possession, then he was fine with a fever—but he had no idea where his son's tolerance was beyond that. A fever plus the dragon's touch, for all he knew, could be past the tipping point.

For that reason, he'd tried to ban Toothless from Hiccup.

(He got about as good a reaction to that as you'd expect.)

So when they pulled into the harbor, those who'd been left on Berk were treated to a sight they would likely never forget.

The same Night Fury that had been taken away in chains was now on top of the stempost, its huge black wings spread wide, hissing like a mad cat down to the deck.

There were dragons flying through the air, and teenagers on their backs, calling out to each other and the people below.

And nobody seemed to be trying to kill them.

When the first ship hit the docks, the Chief of the tribe, a huge, hulking man, was holding a thin, limp little body and scowling up at the hissing dragon. The moment he was on dry land, he ran.

Healers flanked him on every side and the Night Fury leapt off its perch to follow, gliding shakily to the floor before running after him. The black beast, earthbound but still faster than any man, even

Stoick the Vast, caught up quickly and tried to poke its head towards the boy in his arms.

"Away, ye black devil!" the Chief shouted. The Night Fury roared in his face. Neither one of them stopped, or even tried to kill the other.

The village was struck dumb. They were struck dumber by the story those on the boats had to tell them.

As that story was being told, inside the medicine hall, the Healers made their potions. They chanted and prayed to HlÃ-n for his life and safety. Gothi herself arrived and joined in for the first time since she retired as a Healer, silent as ever. Stoick sat by his son and watched, and the dragonâ€"flat-out refusing to be left outsideâ€"sat into a corner, eyes narrowed but body curled as tight as he could make it, to give these strange squishes room to move.

* * *

><p>The rituals gave Stoick plenty of time to think.<p>

Most Vikings, when presented with the option of thinking, threw it aside like a hot ember on the palm. Not because they were stupid (though there were a fewâ€|), but because they were stubborn, to the point of never letting a thought go. Stubbornness meant they were able to wait out storms, keep fighting when blood loss would've dropped a lesser man, hold down a dragon five times their size â€| but the longer you held down a _thought_, the more it tended to fester in the heart.

Stoick, however, hadn't ever been taught to _not_ thinkâ€"almost the opposite, in fact; as the Chief, he needed to weigh every option and plan ahead. It required a certain, odd skill that he'd struggled in picking up, but now couldn't do without: being able to just drop it and leave, like it had never existed, once it was done.

No one else in the village could even comprehend it. Just drop it? What, likeâ€| _not be stubborn_? What kind of unnatural thing _was_ that? But he managed it, and it had saved him more than once.

Death in the Nutken family? Help with the burial, give the distraught mother his sympathies for her first stillborn, and move on; sadness would gnaw away at his chest.

Three ships sunk on accident? Coordinate a salvage crew, don't think about how Berk's fleet was now overstretched and if that an attack cameâ€|; _if_s would mold his rational mind.

His son nearly killed? Because of his own foolishness?

â€|He couldn't drop the thought.

Maybe it was because there was nothing to _do_â€"only wait and see if the Healers' spells and potions would work, if his son would open those eyes again.

(He had his mother's eyesâ€| when they weren't that Night Fury's.)

Then again, he'd had plenty to do back on the Nestâ€"salvaging the ships for the trip back, organizing the mass of 200-some Vikings, picking the teenagers for anything they might've left out about the last few weeksâ€"but he hadn't stopped thinking about Hiccup then either.

They'd both apologized to one anotherâ€"Stoick had apologized, looking right into the Night-Fury-like eyes of his son, because he hadn't listened and the consequences of that had been eating ships and men in front of them.

â€|the consequences, of him not listening, was in the stump of his son's left leg.

He had a moment of horrified peaceâ€"if there was such a thingâ€"from his mind, before the black thoughts returned again. Before those memories of how he'd treated his only child, returned again.

You're not a Viking... you're not my son.

...Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to drop these thoughts. What right did he have, after that?

Since the boy had been littleâ€"well, littlerâ€"Stoick had tried to do what was best for him. He'd tried to raise him the way he'd been raised, to be a strong, tough, level-headed leader of violent men. To be a Chief. To be a Viking.

Hiccupâ€| had never responded like he'd thought. Like he should've. The boy was like the boiling mountain on his brother HarÃ³r's islandâ€"completely unpredictable, rarely useful and often destructive. Stoick had seen a little hope in his pure stubbornness, a tenacity that he'd definitely gotten from him and Val's entire line both, but even that faded into the background after a while.

When he brought the boy fishing to teach him about the world, he went off in search of gnomes and trolls. When he urged him to pick up a sword or axe to introduce him to violence, the boy had tripped and lost it in a bog. When it came the time to force his child to learn how to read, because every Chief needed to read, Hiccup had loved it, picking up every book in sight hungrily, instead of running off to play like the rest of his peers. When he told his son to never run in sight of other people, shackling him for his own good, he got no arguments, only quiet acceptance. When he'd sent the boy to bulk up by working with Gobber, Hiccup hadn't just lifted the iron, he'd started building things with it.

When he'd told his son to bang his head against a rock, Hiccup had given him a strange look and pointblank refused to give himself a concussion.

Nothing he'd done had beenâ€| right. Had gotten the right response out of him.

At the time, Stoick hadn't seen what he was doing wrong. Some part of himâ€"small, dark, unspokenâ€"had pointed the blame to Hiccup. He knew what the village called him, the Useless. He glared at anyone foolish enough to say it in his presence (a glare was enough to send

them cowering for their lives) but he'd never said a word against it, because maybe, the teasing would manage what he couldn't: install some bravery into the boy.

Now, though, he knew the blame had to be turned around. _Hiccup_ had plenty of bravery, from every last one of his ancestors, human and Æsir—how else could he have approached a fallen Night Fury? _Hiccup_ wasn't weak; that much was made obvious when he'd had the leg removed, and when his clothes were rolled back and a myriad of differently aged bruises and a hundred old burns and scars were revealed across most of his body and arms.

Hiccup was brave and strong in his own way, but Stoick had never seen it. He'd done everything wrong by his son, trying to pound out the black spots and missing the golden gleams in the process.

One of those black eyes were caused by his pounding, and the thought made the Chief of Berk sick to his stomach.

That was why he'd made the decision to ban Toothless from touching Hiccup. Because it made sense, and because he wanted to help, to do right by the boy who'd stood fast as a proper Heir, and as a fundamentally good person, by protecting his people even after they'd shunned him.

Hiccup was well-known for being a walking disaster to the village, bringing down entire houses overnight. Stoick felt like he'd caused the same amount of damage—just invisibly, by doing everything wrong where Hiccup was concerned.

His son had done his best to make up for his mistakes. Stoick would, too; and he was starting with Hiccup's own health.

Gerdy relaxed from her ritualistic pose, arms thrown high and her face to the sky, and looked down at the group before her.

"You must take him home," she said, bringing him from his thoughts. "There is no more we can do for him here—he will recover better in more familiar surroundings."

"Do ye know what's wrong with him?" Stoick asked, nerves clenching in his gut. "His leg—it's not—?"

"The rot? No." Breaths of relief came from all around, even the devil in the back. _No one_ wanted the rot. "The wound is healing cleanly—more cleanly and more quickly than I expected, actually. Hiccup watches your boy, Chief. But as with every amputee, the body needs to recover from such trauma. Hiccup is fighting, and he's a stubborn lad, like his father." Her eyes twinkled, and Stoick now knew she was right. "Give him time, Stoick the Vast. It might take a while, and there might be bad days to balance the good, but I don't think the gods want him back just yet."

The Night Fury made a sound that could only be called _joyful_ and leapt out of its tight curl. The Healers, still nervous, scattered, giving the dragon enough room to come forward and push his nose gently against Hiccup's temple.

Stoick stood angrily. "I _told_ ye not to do that, you—!"

Hiccup whined in relief and turned into the touch. All of Stoick's anger left him, and he saw a toxic green eye give him a _look_.

_Just _try_ and take me away._

Stoick fell back into his chair, staring. He cradled his head.

So the dragon helped Hiccup, didn't overheat him. Was there _anything_ he could get right when it came to his boy?

Just then, the door to the medicine hall was knocked on. Jokesend opened it, and Astrid bowed her head in respect before pinning her gaze on the Chief. Her eyes hardened and there was a tightness in the corner of her mouth.

"Mildew's in the village square."

The news had Stoick back on his feet, and even the Night Fury looked up. They traded a look, than glanced down at Hiccup.

The Night Fury met his eyes, snuffed, and jerked his head to the door. Stoick didn't need a divine Gift to understand him.

I've got this. You get the dam# ba\$tard.

The Chief turned to the door and let fury boil in his stomach like black, hot, sticky oil. Maybe he _couldn't_ help Hiccup, not right now, not in the way he wanted.

But get justice for him? _That_ he couldn't fail.

* * *

><p>A few satisfying hours later, with Gobber and Spitelout's help, they got Hiccup back into the Haddock house. Most of the village, by that time, had heard at least part of the story while helping the others off the ships that had made it back, and the group, with Hiccup laid on a flat board between his father and uncle, would've had a hard time navigating the crowd that had formed.

_Would've_â€"if it weren't for Toothless.

The moment the Night Fury appeared from the medicine hall, the crowd had scattered. Screams of _Night Fury_ and _get down_ echoed through the air, but the dragon never attacked.

(He did growl though.)

But his presence alone cut a line through the throng that the three highest-ranking men in the village eagerly took advantage of. Walking carefully so that the boy wouldn't roll off, they carried him up the hill and into the house.

While Toothless sniffed and nosed around the inside of a squish nestâ€"something he'd never been inside before, and this one smelled like Hiccupâ€"the three grown men scratched their heads and tried to figure out whether the bed needed to be moved down, or Hiccup up.

"Tha' bed wasn' made ta be moved," Spitelout said, thumbing up to the strange second floor. "An' if we throw it off th' edge, it'll break hittin' th' ground." He knew, because it was his family who'd made it, as a present to his newly married brother some years ago.

(No one had dared tell Hiccup that it had been his parents' wedding bed, because then he would've refused to sleep in it and tried to build one of his ownâ€ and probably taken down part of the village in the process, somehow.)

"It won' exac'ly be easy fer 'im, walkin' down those steps with a new stump!" Gobber retaliated. He knew, because he'd had two such new stumps before.

Stoick rubbed his chin. "On the other hand," he pointed out, cutting them both off. "That would mean he wouldn't try runnin' off with that black devil o' his the minute he wakes up."

Gobber and Spitelout shared a glance. A freshly limbless Hiccup, who was clumsy and destructive on his best days with both feet, running around the village with a Night Fury at his heel?

"Second floor it is, then," they decided together.

They shuffled and squeezed and grunted, but eventually, they got the boy onto the planks and upstairs. Toothless leapt up from the first floor, scrambling with his claws until he could pull himself up onto the loft.

The dragon wasn't the only one looking around at this pointâ€Stoick hadn't been up here in he really didn't know how long, but it was Hiccup's own personal space. Stoick's own corner of the house was closed off by thick sail-cloths, functional inside but otherwise plain; he had no idea what his son's would look like.

The first thing he'd noticed was the lack of lightâ€it took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, which was thick over the entire loft. It was afternoon outside, but Stoick had layered the roof several times in a desperate attempt to keep heat inside during Devastating Winter, to keep the occupants safeâ€that same layer blocked out any of the sunlight from coming through the boards and slats, leaving the loft pitch black.

Toothless, however, didn't seem to have an issueâ€Stoick heard his claws against the wood, and then the tiniest blaze of blue fire lit a handful of candles, illuminating the room.

When he could see, and Spitelout and Gobber had placed the unconscious boy onto his bed, pulled the green blanket to his neck, Stoick noticed the second thing; how small the place was. Though admittedly they were some of the largest men on the island, the three of them alone took up every inch of spare floor space beyond the bed. There wasn't even any room for Toothless with the three of them there, and the beast was now settling onto the rafters above them, keeping a concerned gaze on his rider below.

They'd had to squeeze through the doorway, which seemed smaller than it should be. It was almost like the room itself was trying to keep them out; or like Hiccup was trying to take up as little space as

possible himself.

The space issue certainly wasn't helped that the five feet to the entire back wall was cluttered inâ€| stuff. Hiccup stuff, Stoick could only assume, because he had literally no other descriptive for the chaos of wood and metal that hid the floor from view.

The clutter had spread even beyond that area, though in different ways. Behind the bed, there were pieces of parchment nailed to the wallsâ€ sketches, charcoal and paint, of Toothless, and what looked like a left tailfin. Books were stacked high on top of and next to his bed, and there was a cup of charcoal sticks and brushes on a table beside it. He had a shelf there too, taken up by little trinkets he must've found around the islandâ€ a rusty seaxe, the tip of a fang, a few intricately carved wooden coins, a pile of large black feathers loosely bound by twine.

A desk off to the side of the original pile had random bits on it, but also a clean space in the center for working. Scraps of metal, wood, and leather were scattered around the room, dropped in haste and muttering that Stoick could remember hearing and dreading a few months ago.

As his eyes continued to work with the tiny amount of lightâ€ and as, he privately figured, the sputtering candles burned brighter with Hiccup nearby, he saw that the chaotic pile was actually a collection of small and full-sized models of those inventions. Close to the edgeâ€ most recent, probablyâ€ there was a log on sticks, like someone would use to build a saddle, surrounded by scrap leather, but shaped too oddly for it to fit a horse.

Perfect, though, for a Night Fury.

"Did you teach him to build saddles, Gobber?" Stoick asked, looking over to his friend. It wasn't that he was surprised, exactlyâ€ Hiccup's hands had entered the forge as a new set to be used by Gobber, and had grown a mind of their ownâ€ but he was definitely confused. He didn't know Gobber knew how to make saddles.

The blacksmith had picked up one of the tiniest models in one hand. He must've touched it in the wrong place, because suddenly four little slivers of wood came flying out in every direction, making the man yelp and throw the thing away.

"No, no I did not," Gobber said, looking at his hand to ensure there weren't splinters. "An' I certainly didn't teach 'im ta buil' tha', whatever the Hel tha' was. But I've tol' ye time an' time again, Stoick, th' boy's go' the gif' fer forgin'. I mean, look at all this!"

He gestured widely, then pointed directly at the large sketch of the fin. "If tha' ain' th' leather replacemen' fer Toothless's fin, I'll eat mah sock, bu' I have no idea 'ow it works."

"Replacement?" No one had ever said Spitelout had the brightest polished helmet on the island, but it was hard for even him to miss when Toothless laid down beside Hiccup's bed, heads together, and swung his tail forward, the singular fin opening and shielding both their eyes from the bright sun through the small window. "Grea'

OÃ°inâ€| the boy _did_ shoot it down."

"An' then put it back up, by th' looks of it," Gobber nodded, still squinting at the sketches. "Actuallyâ€|"

He ripped the parchment off the thin nails holding it to the wall, spreading it out for a good look. Stoick looked at him, and Gobber shrugged. "'Is old tack got ruined in th' bat'le, righ'? Seems th' least we can do is replace it. 'D imagine Hicca liked ta fly on th' beastâ€"he always did say 'is runnin' was like flyin' on th' ground."

That made Spitelout look up. "Wai'â€"is he even goin' ta be able ta run, with that?" he asked, gesturing to the boy's stump. "Like th' blur he didâ€"however in Hel he did it?"

In the middle of Gobber and Stoick's shared glanceâ€"Hiccup _loved_ running, and if he wasn't able to anymoreâ€|â€"the Chief's younger brother narrowed his gaze. "An' ye _still_ haven' explained 'ow he can do all o' tha'. Ye didn' wan' th' whole village talkin' abou' it, fine, but we're _family_, Stoick."

The word _family_ made him cringe inwardly. He really had hated keeping the secret from his brother; maybe, with so many of Hiccup's secretsâ€"ones even _Stoick_ hadn't known aboutâ€"coming out, maybe it was time to tell the truth. To Spitelout, at least.

Gobber, when Stoick looked to him for his opinion, shrugged. "'T's yer's an' Hicca's secret, old friend."

Stoick sighed and massaged his head. "We'll need to do this somewhere private."

The old blacksmith started limping towards the stairs. "I'll watch th' doâ€| er, hole, I guess."

(Stoick had wondered, when he'd returned home after six weeks, why Hiccup hadn't replaced it yet. Apparently, he'd just had other things on his mind.)

Once Gobber was out of sight, presumably standing in as a yellow and rather smelly replacement for the slab of wood, Stoick grunted, not looking forward to the conversation ahead, and sat down at the foot of Hiccup's bed.

Spitelout crossed his arms and waited, remembering all the chiefing lessons Stoick and HarÃ°r had gone through when all three of them were younger, as the two older brothers were close in age and about to take the on hammerâ€"even though, ultimately, HarÃ°r had moved out and taken the helm at a different island. They'd been taught to _think_, and strategize, as best as they could, and Spitelout had been glad that he would just become second-in-command, because thinking wasn't his thing.

But he knew better than to interrupt his older brother's thoughtsâ€"the man would pummel him for it, had before and would nowâ€"so he just waited.

Finally, Stoick looked up and met his eyes. "Ye can't tell _anyone_ about this. Not even yer family, Spite'."

Spitelout frowned. "I'm not keepin' things from Mjoll," he warned.

Stoick weighed his options. Mjoll was a brilliant match for his brother, brash and strong as any good Viking woman, and completely unwilling to take the yak\$hit he spouted like a Zippleback's gas head, but she was also nosy and a gossip. Luckily, she was also extremely loyal, and had also been a very close friend of Valka. Mjoll would definitely keep her mouth shut about her old friend's secret.

The Chief nodded. "If she asks, ye can tell Mjoll. She'll need to swear her silence as well. But not Snotlout, nor any of the others." Sensing Spitelout about to protest, he turned to his son. "This is more Hiccup's secret than mine, and he should make the decision to tell his friends."

Spitelout grumbled, but nodded to his Chief. "So, wha's the big secret?"

Stoick took a deep breath and looked his brother right in the eye. Spitelout's arms fell to his side as he recognized the look in those green orbsâ€"serious, grieving, and grave. This was big, to him, and if it was big to Stoick the Vast, then it had to be truly huge.

He had no idea.

* * *

><p>The Healers had warned that Hiccup might get worse before he got better; bad days with the good. But they never said how bad it would really get.

The first few days, when he wasn't deciding what to do with those who'd been persuaded by Mildew into helping chain and mutilate his son like an animal, or running just the most vital of his daily chieftain duties, Stoick was at the house. There was every chance that Hiccup would wake, and every chance that he wouldn't just yet, but he didn't want his son to come back into the world alone.

(Not that he'd really be alone. Toothless never left the room, and Astrid or one of the teens brought in a basket of fish every day for him, always cod for some reason.)

((Also, relatedly, the food problem was ceasing to be a problem, with the old Ring dragons helping each fishing boat by herding entire schools into the nets, and making their own catches to help. As far as he knew, the teens who fed Toothless and visited Hiccup almost every day, were actually naming and bonding with the four creatures.))

That first week, Stoick had picked up basically every movement, every mutter, and held it as a light in his chest that his boy was alright. Hiccup, when his eyes flittered open, would only sometimes be coherent, would only sometimes speak in Norse, and during some of the times only growls and warbles came out, even that black devil had looked panicked and confused; but nonsense or not, dragon or Norse,

it was still Hiccup, and it was proof that he was coming back.

When he was coherent enough for Stoick to understand him, the boy never remembered waking up earlier.

(Stoick never told him about his leg, during those times. He didn't want the shock to hit more than once, because he had a feeling his son might not take it too well.)

He'd woken maybe a total of ten or eleven times over those first days. The Healers took it as a good sign.

Then, on the ninth day back on Berk, he closed his eyes and didn't wake up again.

It had been four days since then. The first two, Stoick had been comfortable enough thinking that it was just a dipâ€"they _had_ said bad days, no matter how worrying that wasâ€"to still go and work chiefly duties, leaving Toothless as a vigilant guard over his son.

The hardest part of his day was whenever someone came up with a dragon-related problemâ€"as head of the tribe, it was him that most people went to for advice, after Gothi (who'd apparently bolted herself in her house, and left the crowds to her son). But he had no more of a clue than anyone else did when it came to the beasts. He knew how to kill them, but they couldn't do that anymore, and more and more of them were filling up the island.

It got to the point where it almost looked like war was ready to break out again, a few times, and Stoick had been worried about what could happen, to his village and to his son and even to the boy's dragon, if it did come to arms. Thankfully though, it seemed that a certain group of teenagers had taken the issue upon themselves, and were taking their new duties seriously. As time passed, he just started pointing any complainers towards them and washed his hands of the matter.

Thank Thor there were still some of the normal chores to be done: he'd watched and helped the fish get pulled in, and settled arguments between villagers. Stoick introduced newborn members to the tribe and buried the ones who'd left them. He'd kept up with Gobber, who was grumbling about the load of construction materials being requested of him to rebuild the fleet while still working on Hiccup's new tack and foot ("â€|an' with mah apprentice lazin' away up in 'is bed, leavin' _me_ shortâ€"well, _one_-'anded! Ye'd think they'd be a bi' more understandin'!").

When he returned to the house, every night, he asked Toothless if Hiccup had woken up. The negative, sad warbles had made his heart sink the first time, and kept on since.

The third day had dawned with a visit from most of the teens. Stoick had let them in, scraping at his brain to try and remember a time Hiccup had _ever_ had friends overâ€| and not finding a single one.

He'd hoped, for a while, that the sheer _racket_ they were all making up there would wake the stubbornly sleeping boy, so he hadn't complained much about it, and let them do their thing.

(Up until he heard hammers and saws going.)

(Apparently, Astrid had pointed out how dull and sad Toothless and his scales looked in the dark room, and the others decided he needed some sun. Since the dragon refused to leave Hiccup, and since Hiccup looked pale enough to need it as well, they figured what the Chief's house really needed was a dam^ed _hole_ _in the roof_.)

((And it was a hole, not that whatever they called itâ€"an OÃ°in-dam^ed _skylight_. It was a _hole_, and for some reason, it was in his _roof_.))

(An hour and a half of shouting and threats to have them kicked off his island later, Hiccup had a massive, Night-Fury sized _hole_ _in his roof_, right over his bed. They'd torn out the insulating layers to make it, so it let drafts in, but when Stoick had gone to put an extra covering over his boy, he'd found Toothless holding him in one of those cocoons on his bed, and figured him warm enough.)

The fourth day, day thirteen back on Berk, was the worst. That was the day that Hiccup died.

* * *

><p>I know I know! I suck! But giving you what you want-interim scenes-requires a little bit of payback, lovelies.
;P
**

Until next time! Hope you liked it!

PEACE,

~Tibki

25. Chapter 25

Hey y'all,

Many thanks to a special reviewer for pointing out a kinda important typo in the last chapter! Here we go!

* * *

><p>That was the day Hiccup died... his hair. They used a lye-based dye, as customary of Vikings, in the hope of turning him into a proper, fair-haired Heir. Unfortunately, they misread the box sold to them by GreenWal the Pharmacist and didn't buy enough-so his hair was oddly layered-and on top of that, for once, THE BOX DID NOT SAY HONEY-MIST AUBURN.

* * *

><p>Yeah, jk. Hiccup's dead. :D

**But alright, alright-I won't be so mean as to leave it like that all week. **

****Besides, it's almost done! The month I warned for the daily update is almost complete! This chapter, an epilogue, and this story is done!****

****Now don't worry, my lovelies-_this is not the total end. _I had everything related to this world put onto one big word file, labeled 'Quarter' (because Hiccup's One-Quarter god and that's how I saved the story when I wrote down the first plot bunny five years ago; I haven't been writing that long, I abandoned it for quite some time, actually). ****

****Anyway, the end of SG I've got planned sticks at page 352 of 513 on the Word Document. The rest kinda needs more writing and revising than these chapters did, though, and I'm considering adding _Gift of the Night Fury_ and/or _Legend of the Bone Knapper_ before I do the series and/or an original plotline.**
>

****See the amount of and/ors up there? I've got a lot of planning to do, and that's not gonna happen one day at a time. But I can give you completion on this story, until then!****

****PLEASE NOTE PLEASE NOTE PLEASE NOTE!****

****I had to revamp the set up of the story. The Interlude was removed and placed within this chapter, because it fit better, and little bits and pieces were added. Just in case you realize 'hey. I've read this before. Is Tibki reusing text?' No. I'm re-placing it.****

****Anyway, hope you like it, lovelies!****

****DISCLAIMED.****

*** * ***

><p>CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE_

He'd been breathing raggedly the night before, but it wasn't until morning that Toothless had woken Stoick with paws on his chest and a terrified look in his eye.

(After nearly two weeks in the same house, Stoick was actually starting to see _emotion_ in the dragon, and the thought made his head ache.)

But regardless of headaches, he'd shot up, checked on Hiccup, and then roused Gerdy from her bed an hour before sunrise.

The fever had returned with a vengeance. Color rose in his cheeks and the rest of him turned pale and clammy. His thin chest struggled for hours, every breath exhausting him. But he was stubborn, and those lungs kept pumping.

The Healers did what they could, potions and spells and everything. Astrid and the others dropped by at noon to work more on the _hole_, but their visit turned into a quiet, shocked one when Stoick silently let them upstairs and showed them what was happening.

Gothi dropped byâ€"she hadn't been in that house since Val's

death" and sat by her grandson for a few hours. Spitelout, even though after two weeks he was still a bit in shock about Hiccup of all people being the whole grandson of Thor, took over the chieftain duties for the day"he wasn't bright, but he was fair enough to take the yoke off his brother's laden shoulders for one day.

When storm clouds started brewing on the horizon, and harsh winds started tearing through the village, Stoick had flashbacks to a night sixteen years ago, and had moved quickly back up to his son's side.

Toothless, the entire day, laid with his head by Hiccup's, breathing into his ear. When he could, he took slow breaths, and the motions of their chests matched perfectly, as Hiccup's lungs took their cues from Toothless's.

When SÃ31 set on what had been a fair day, if suddenly strangely threatened with rain, the clouds crossed the entire sky and the world darkened.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, and Hiccup's chest finally justâ€ stopped.

Silence.

A blast of lightning hit the center of Berk, and an unholy, hopeless and black howl cut through the village like an icy blade to the heart.

__**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAâ€|**__

The entire tribe froze at the sound. In the forge, Gobber closed his eyes, because it was coming from the Chief's house. The last time they'd heard the mourning cry was at the funeral, and then, there'd been two.

__**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA€|**__

The dragon-training class, hearing it from their spots in their various homes through the village, shot their heads up, paling. Because they knew the voices that made the sound, but there was only one pitch now.

__**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAâ€|**__

Stoick was kneeling by the bed, eyes dripping and shut, not able to look at the silent and still body of his son on the planks in front of him. His boy. Gone, and he'd never even gotten to talk with him againâ€”he'd never truly woken up after the battle.

The battle Stoick had started.

Valka had asked him, her dying request, to keep Hiccup safe. He had done, by refusing to leave him in the woods like any other hiccup, by keeping him from dragon training as long as possible, by padding those walls even if it kept light out, but nowâ€

`_I've failed you, Val. I did thisâ€¦_`

__**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAâ€|**__

Toothless, his heart aching and bleeding inside of his chest, lowered his head from his mourning call. He wished he could cry tears like squishes could, because the howl didn't seem like enough for the thin cousin who'd given him flight, who'd given him life and happiness.

He knew squishes thought dragons were cold-blooded, but he'd never felt that way before now. Without thin hands on his scales, a crooked smile in front of his eyes, that light sarcasm in his ears or that gentle warmth in his veins, his whole body felt frozen.

Being warm meant being safe, to a dragon, because of their inner fire. Now, Toothless felt cold, because his little flame was gone.

The devastation and loss settled into his limbs where Hiccup's warmth had laid so recently.

and then it replaced itself with fiery determination.

`_This was _not_ it._`

Dragons believed in balances. They believed that the gods kept them. That they kept the world tied together and stopped it from falling apart—and Toothless believed that Hiccup had been his balance from the start. They were both small, intelligent next to their peers, but while he was lauded and feared, Hiccup was ridiculed and ignored. Where Toothless's bolts and claws could destroy, Hiccup's hands could create. Toothless controlled the right side of his tailfin, and Hiccup managed the left.

Their lives were in balance. Hiccup had spared Toothless's life that first day, and Toothless had returned the favor. Hiccup had saved him from starvation, Toothless had kept him from drowning. Hiccup's plan had sped them away from the parasite's jaws, and Toothless's wings had saved (most of) him from the flames.

But the Squish had done it once moreâ€”because he gave him `_flight_`.

He knew what squishes said about downed dragons, because it was true. Toothless would have been dead without Hiccup, even if he'd fed him forever in that coveâ€”being unable to fly for too long would have eventually killed Toothless's spirit, which would've quickly killed him, too. By jumping onto his tail that day, and his back later, the boy kept him alive by letting them both soar. By helping him fly, Hiccup saved him from certain death. He'd given him life itself.

Toothless had not saved Hiccup for that, not yet. They were still in imbalance.

The gods fixed imbalances. And their sire, high above, was rumbling enough that maybeâ€¦_maybe_â€¦ he, and Toothless's own dam, would agree to help right it.

* * *

><p>There were armsâ€¦ lithe and narrow, but warm and gentle. I didn'tâ€¦ I didn't recognize themâ€¦ but I did. Somehow.<p>

"He's so smallâ€¦" The voice was familiar in the same way the arms wereâ€¦"accented like my Dad's, gently cradling my ears like the arms were cradling my sides.

It was extraordinarily comfortable, but somethingâ€¦"something was missing. Something was wrong. I had to get up.

"Oh no, hush, my little oneâ€¦ hush, Hiccup, you're safeâ€¦"

Where was Toothless? Was he okay? The last thing I remembered wasâ€¦"was the crash, I justâ€¦ Where was my cousin?

There was a boom of laughter, echoing like thunder. "Hah! Look, brother!" This voice was rich, and sounded like sunshine and life-giving summer storms. "Takes after his gods-father, doesn't he? First thing he thinks aboutâ€¦"where's my bloodbrother? Haha! Do not worry, childâ€¦"your Toothless is hale."

I tried to squint my eyes open, but hissed as a blinding light tore into them. Best not try that again. But I couldn't hear my cousinâ€¦"I think?â€¦"so how would they know? But unable to really move, my limbs felt so heavy, I had to take their word for it. Luckily, they didn't sound too untrustworthy.

"Oh, don't think so much of me, you great fool," a silkier tone added. Cultured, matureâ€¦"but hinted with sly mischief, like a smirk hidden behind a polite hand. If this one had assured me about Toothless, I'd've sat up anyway. "Look, he's seeking to wake, now that he has been told to sleepâ€¦"tell me that's not more of your stubborn idiosyncrasy."

A great sigh, like a bear had wondered why the world had dealt him the cards it had. "Brotherâ€¦"

"Oh, my apologies. Six-syllable words too complex for you, old friend?"

"_Loki_."

A much lighter, more flippant sigh. I wondered what was going on.

* * *

><p>When the mourning cries suddenly ceased, Stoick opened his grieving eyes.<p>

The Night Fury was looking down at Hiccup, eyes big and pupils blown wide. He could see devastation in those eyesâ€¦"

â€¦"but then suddenly, it wasn't there anymore.

The dragon looked up to the grey, roiling sky through that damaged hole. Stoick had no warning before the beast grabbed Hiccup's shirt in his mouth and launched the pair of them out of the house through it.

For a moment, Stoick was left gaping, suddenly alone in the

room.

And then the anger hit.

"BRING MY BOY BACK, YOU BLACK DEVIL!" he roared, rushing down the stairs and picking up his well-worn battleaxe.

* * *

><p>Jostling his precious cargo as little as possible, Toothless glided as best he could to the highest point he knew of in the Squish Nestâ€"just outside that cave they had carved into the mountain.<p>

Here, the air was clearest of the sea spray below. Here, they were as close to Thor's kingdom and as far from NjÃ¶rdr's unwelcoming (to Hiccup) realm as possible.

Here, was where he'd make his appeal.

With the storm starting to blow fiercely in every direction, with fat drops of water falling from the skies, Toothless spread his massive wings and released a huge, long, impossibly loud and broken ****ROAR**** into the heavens, into the cloud he knew held his makers.

The wind buffeted himâ€"he didn't care, even with it tearing at his wings, he steeled himself and kept them spread, railing fiercely against the fate that the gods had thrown upon thin shoulders. The water fell into his eyes, his mouth, but he never stopped. His lungs ran out of air, so he fired shots of plasma instead, every last one exploding in the cloud like a lightning bolt watched in reverse.

Toothless roared, because there was a cooling body underneath himâ€"protected from the cold, the wet, the windâ€"that wasn't supposed to be so still.

Toothless roared, because a little flame had been extinguished who had been the last one to deserve to go.

Toothless roared, because he'd miss his Squish.

(And his Squish, more importantly, would miss him.)

The sound of a furious battle cry was finally what made Toothless stop his lament and plea into the heavens. Halfway between where he stood and the little Squish nest he'd come from was his Squish's father, holding up an axe and looking terrifying in the pouring grey rain.

"THAT'S MY SON, YOU BLACK BEAST OF HEL!"

* * *

><p>More was said, but almost as soon as the words entered my ears, I forgot them.<p>

"That would be my doing, little Æsmegir," the cultured voice said softly. "My daughter has only grudgingly allowed you from her grasp

in the first place, and no man is ever allowed remember their time in the Otherwords, when returned to Midgard. No man can be allowed hear the words of the Æsir, and truly remember them. You should listen to that Cousin of yours more oftenâ€”great Gifts we have, but there must always be a balance in the world of mortals. Even we must watch our actions. The hand of Asgard would tip the scales too far in Midgardâ€”we must always act indirectly."

"Even when we watch over our kin and kind," the deeper voice rumbled.

A thin, sure hand weaved through my hair. "And never forgetâ€”you might not be my blood, but you are my kind, little hiccup." The hand grew more halting as it drew near my mouthâ€”I winced as it brushed my lips, the holes placed every centimeter. I tried to draw away, and sank further into the gentle hold of those arms. "And even if I must toe the line, even if my actions will have to be spread over years, I protect my kind."

"As do I."

The first voiceâ€”moreâ€”feminine? Softer and more comforting than the othersâ€”spoke again. "Oh my boy. So much will change for you, from now onâ€”"

"He has what he needs. A strong heart, to show compassion."

"A quick mind, to fix what has been wronged."

"And the love of family. His own Special Gifts."

Something behind my heart buzzed lightly and then settled, as if comforted by the words I could no longer remember. I tried to twist where I was held, but my body didn't seem to want to move.

* * *

><p>(Toothless would later wonder if it was grief or madness driving Stoick up the hill. As of that moment, he didn't much *care*, even as the swinging axe was brought closer and closer to his own neck.)

"**P**__lease_**,*** Toothless wailed, looking to the rolling heavens, ignoring the large squish like he wasn't even there. He didn't matterâ€”only Hiccup did. **D**on't take my brother away, not like this, not this fast. Thor, Hel, _please_. Give us a chance**.***

The sky rumbled, and then charged, the smell of burning air filling his nostrils. Toothless's eyes widened, his mouth open in a gape of surprise.

The bolt that shot its way down was thick and more brilliantly blue than any so far.

It hit Toothless's open mouth exactly.

* * *

><p>"The world will always take, young Hiccup," the deep voice

warned, more serious than before. Somehow, though it had been black the entire time apart from my singular attempt to open my eyes, I could tell I was about to fall unconscious again. My limbs became numb and I felt oblivion opening up in the darkness in front of me. "It will try to leave you crippled, unable to walk forward in life."<p>

"It will cripple you in more than one way today," the lighter added quietly. I tipped forward into nothingness, caught in slow motion.

"But the funny thing about the world," the woman finished softly, her voice fading with every moment, "is that it likes to give back too."

When another hand passed through my hair, I smelled burning air, just before my mind closed off completely.

"There's a balance in that, my little one. My brave, brave son."

* * *

><p>The buzz of lightning emptied into him. It filled him instantly, tingling and zapping and quick like Hiccup's heat never was. It wasâ€| warm, but not nearly the same way Hiccup was warm; Hiccup was warm like a fire that wouldn't burn pouring through his veins, contentment and companionshipâ€"this was warm like bright sun on his scales on a the perfect summer day for running and flying, quick and happy and energetic. This was fast and all encompassingâ€"it made his skin, underneath the tough scales, shudder and shiver, all the way along his spine and down every square inch of his wings.

Muscles spasmed and Toothless felt himself jolt and jerkâ€"it hit his mind and eyes, and he felt the lids shutter open and closed, too fast for him to see anything but glimpses of light and the dark world around him. It didn't _hurt_, though.

And maybeâ€| maybe that was because the lightning coursing through his system wasn'tâ€| _meant_ to hurt.

When it stopped, he felt the energyâ€"it had to be energy, in its purest form, because he couldn't imagine the buzzing belonging to anything elseâ€"settle in the back of his throat, right above where the gas for his bolts came from. There it curled like he would himself in a sunny spot, buzzing and ready and eager to be used.

Use it well.

It was in unisonâ€"a deep voice in pride, and a rasping voice in warning. The duo was one he'd only heard once before in his lifetime, who had given him the name _Nott's Prince_ the very moment he had been created, out of lightning and the traces of the death of a demi-goddess who'd died bringing her boy into Midgard.

Who Hiccup would call his parentsâ€"who dragons would call his sire and dam, who he'd called his makersâ€"who everyone between would simply call _Thor_ and _Hel_.

Toothless bowed in respect at those who had created him, but only for a momentâ€”because just as quickly as he'd been given the Gift, he received the knowledge of what it wasâ€”

â€”and what exactly it could be used for.

Without hesitation, Toothless reared back and let the energy gather into his mouth like gas before a blast. It swirled like a ball, catching at his teeth when it could, before he spit it straight downâ€”

â€”into Hiccup's heart.

Toothless did miss. A little. Unused to the power just given to him, and still panicking at the sight of the still and silent Squish body underneath, he'd called up far too muchâ€”to compare, he created a constant stream of a blast like he used for beds instead of the single, precise shot he'd once used to bring down stone-slingersâ€”catapults, Hiccup had called them.

As a result, edges of the bolt of lightning he'd just thrown scattered to the side and hit the ground in a circle around them.

(There would be a scorch mark for just a few hours; by the time SÃ³l rose once more, there'd be grass and flowers growing out of nonexistent cracks in the rock in a perfect circle, and they'd stay there for generations.)

When Toothless couldn't send anymore of that energy Hiccup's way, he pulled back.

â€”and leapt away as a shining iron blade nearly took his head off his shoulders.

* * *

><p>My eyes opened to black, stormy skies and a nightmare, playing out right above my head.<p>

* * *

><p>"GET AWAY FROM MY SON!" Stoick roared, hefting his axe high once more.<p>

Toothless scrambled away as he swung it again, barely moving in time. Had his tailfin not already been lost to fate, it would've been damaged irreparably by the axe that ching_ed off the rock where it had once been.

The Night Fury fell back again, his claws slipping on the damp and wet rock underfoot and sending him sprawling. He fell, his back and wings flat against the walls of the carved cave, underneath the towering squish in front of him.

Stoick raised his axe high for the last swing. "This is for Hiccup_, you dam# devil," he growled.

"Dad, don't!"

Nothing could've made him freeze faster.

Stoick and Toothless both turned, Toothless's eyes growing huge and Stoick's axe dropping to the ground, inches from pitchy scales.

Hiccup was on his knees, one hand on the ground and the other outstretched to the horrific scene in front of him. His eyes were open, and his chest was heaving with exertion and, more importantly, _air_.

It actually worked!

"Hiccupâ€¦ y-ye're alive!"

Hiccup's supporting arm trembled and he collapsed. Toothless yowled and scrambled onto his feet, leaping to reach the fallen boy the same time Stoick did.

His father picked him up, his son's body mostly limp, but this time there was also the tension of slow movement in a few of the limbs. Hiccup raised a hand and dropped it heavily onto Stoick's chest.

"Don't," he mumbled, and Stoick had to turn his ear close in order to hear the soft, tired voice. "Don'tâ€¦ hurt our aerieâ€¦ Dadâ€¦"

Toothless growled, though it came out more like a whimper. ****H**iccup, you scared the _life_ out of me, if you _ever_ do that again**â€¦*****

"â€¦What?" Despite his obvious exhaustion, a smile touched Hiccup's face. His eyes couldn't stay open, and they shut like two drawbridges cut loose. "â€¦you'll â€¦lick me 'gain?"

Toothless snorted, a small but radiant joy expanding through his entire body at the simple snark he was so _happy_ to hear again. ****N**o**,**** he said, though he flipped the boy's hair up with his tongue anyway. ****I**'ll make you eat more of that nasty fish**.****

Hiccup hummed, obviously most of the way into dreamland. "Wha'ever ya sayâ€¦ Arrâ€¦ogant Dragon."

Never had a more beautiful phrase been spoken. Toothless crooned and put his nose to Hiccup's forehead. ****R**ight back at you, you stupid, _stupid_ Squish**.****

Toothless pulled back once he felt his cousin fall into a feverless sleep, and looked up at Stoick, whose tears were mixing with the rain.

"You saved him," the large squish said. "I-I don't know how, but you saved him, againâ€¦"thank you. Toothless."

Toothless trilled and butted his head against Stoick's hand, urging him to get back inside before Hiccup got cold.

Above them all, lightning crossed the expanse of clouds, brilliant

blue, and, content, the storm started to leave Berk.

* * *

><p>Soooo now we know Hiccup's real Gifts-any sequel, drabble set, rendering of the rest of the canon, will explore Hiccup finding out these things for himself, because as stated, _he don't remember anything he was told._</p>

And because, well. The gods like an adventure, remember? ;)

Epilogue on the way, and then... well. I guess our own adventure is over.

Hope you liked it. :)

PEACE,

~Tibki

26. Epilogue

Hey y'all!

**My original epilogue, in my opinion, sucked. I wanted to write one that was open-ended, for the sake of the possible sequels listed below, but I left it too open. Instead of a creak, I flung it wide like Panic! at the Disco's proverbial Goddam# door, no. Basically, all I managed to do was end this like a chapter and not like an ending.

Here's the third try; second was not only written in a snooty state of mind, but was lacking two very important parenthetical pieces, as pointed out by a lovely reviewer.

Hopefully this will be more satisfactory. My apologies for the chaotic posting, I'll revise better for the sequels.~bows~

DISCLAIMED.

* * *

><p>EPILOGUE_</p>

They told me, later, that I'd woken up a few times before I really regained consciousness. I didn't remember any of them, any conversations I had apparently had with Dad or Toothless, or mumbling nonsense, as they said I sometimes did.

I do remember something hazyâ€”_very_ hazy, but I hold onto the memory anyway, because it was a pair of lithe and warm arms I'd never seen before, but recognized anyway, and being held by them had smelled like burning air.

Regardless of what I remembered, when my eyes opened, it was to a

very familiar sight.

Toothless's wide black snout and enormous green eyes were inches from my face. His nostrils were flaring as he breathedâ€”they had a weird blue glow to them, had he shot a plasma bolt recently?â€”and the air was kicking my hair up gently.

His lips pulled up at the edges when he saw that I was awake. ******_**F**__inally_**!****** he said, butting his head into my shoulder with a happy purr. *****Y**ou lazy Squish, do you have any idea how long you've been out of it**?******

It was taking my mind a minute to wake up, catch upâ€”however long I'd been asleep, it had been a deep one. "He-Hey Toothless," I muttered, smiling a little and raising a hand to his head. "Good to see you, too, bud."

The dragon rolled his eyes, and nudged into my palm. The thing in my chest opened, and its warmth spread through both of us, peaceful and pleasant, waking me up a little more.

"Alrigh' now, ye devil, let me see my son."

The voice made me freezeâ€”because that was my dad's voice. My _dad_ was in the same room as _Toothless_.

Toothless pulled away, and when the big black blockade of a dragon had gotten out of the way, I got to see where exactly I was.

My _room_? "Whaâ€” how'd I get in here?" I asked, looking around. The sight of my dad sitting, looking comfortable and smiling on a chair next to my bed, made me blink. I couldn't remember the last time he'd come up here. "Whyâ€” why're you up hereâ€”Dad, why's _Toothless_â€”?"

Dad chuckled, and I stared at him in total confusion. "Sorry, son. It's just very good to hear your voice again. You've been asleep nearly three weeks."

Thraâ€” "Three _weeks_?" I squeaked, eyes huge. It had to be almost winter outside already! "How in _Helheim_â€”?"

He nodded. "You should be grateful you're alive, son. That wasn't a little thing you lived through."

â€”The parasite. Right.

Well, he wasn't wrong about the _not little_ part. Nodding and putting my hands flat against the boards on either side of me, I tried to push myself verticalâ€”only to get a fiery pain down my left leg and side.

"_Ah!_"

Eyes slamming shut, I fell unceremoniously back onto my pillow, my spine protesting weakly at the sharp drop onto hard wood. "Ow," I whimpered, the sound half-Dragonese, before lifting my head again. "What in the name of the gods was thaâ€”"

The sight of my legs, still under the blanket, made me freeze.

On the right side, there was pretty much what you'd expect, seeing a leg under a blanket. A thin but firm column extending out from a hip, the thigh muscles strengthened by dragon-riding for months, and then a raised knob of a knee, and a skinny shin before the mountain of the foot. Normal stuff.

But the leftâ€¦ I had the thigh, and the knee, but then the blanket justâ€¦ dropped. No foot-mountain.

Flat.

Nothing holding it up.

Nothing _there_.

Dad said something, and maybe Toothless too, but I didn't hear. I breathed in sharply, because there was just no _way_â€¦"I was _sixteen winters_, I couldn't haveâ€¦ there should have beenâ€¦

Shock was on the horizon, but before it hit, I managed to get myself to sit up, hissing at the twinges of pain coming from theâ€¦the thigh. When I was up against the headboard, I grabbed the edge of my blanket and flipped it off.

Cold numbness flashed through my body like a wave of freezing seawater. The right leg was as normal as I'd expectedâ€¦the left was bandaged halfway down the shin, and there was justâ€¦ _nothing_ beyond it.

My foot was gone.

I felt my heart beat steady but _hard_ against my chest, a hammer to the sternum, pounding in my ears. My face felt cold when all the blood fled it, and my hand was shaking as I put it on my thigh. I couldn't take my eyes off of it becauseâ€¦there'd been a _foot_ there, _my_ foot, with a heel that had a scar from broken wood when I was eight, a-and five toes I could just barely remember Dad playing with a-and bones that had broken more than once and muscles and tendons and now there was just _space._

A warm nose pressed gently into my ribs, working its way under my shirt and onto the skin of my side. Heat flowed through the point, and while it wasn't a connection, it was still centering, soothing, and it let me finally release the breath I'd sucked in.

He pulled back away and looked at me. **"H**iccup**â€¦" ** Toothless murmured, his voice soft.

"No!" I closed my eyes and swallowed. Slowly, the numbness eased away, though some of the shock stayed; my stomach roiled. I screwed my eyes up and forced myself to ignore it before opening them again. "N-no. It'sâ€¦it'sâ€¦ it's okay."

That parasite had been big enough to fill a mountain, older than the village itselfâ€¦it would've been a miracle on par with OÃ°in himself dropping out of the sky naked if we'd gotten out of that completely unscathed. "I'm ookay."

Barely. I met Toothless's gentle eyes, desperate.

****_**C**__ousin_**â€| " **I whimpered, and my voice cracked painfully.

Toothless crooned again and bent down to sniff at the-the _stump_, then turned up to face me again, his eyes soft. ***"I**'m sorry, Hiccup**."**

The words hit and stung, like driving rain or sand thrown into the face, but I didn't flinch, only whined helplessly. I looked back down at it and, slowly, took a deep, deep breath; in through the nose, out through the mouth. Like Petri had taught me.

I needed a few of them, but it worked. The last of the shock eased a little, enough, and a gentle, warm press into my hand centered me even more. "Okay," I said. My voice was shaky, but didn't crack anymore. "One foot. Okay. I can do that."

"I'm sure you can," my dad said. I looked over to him, and there was a quiet shine in his eyesâ€"wa-was that _pride_? "Gobber's bringing your prosthesis in the mornin'â€"well. Couple hours from now, I guess."

"Prosthesis," I repeated, and right. I would need one. I nodded sharply. "Rightâ€| " A thought came to mind and I couldn't help but blink, then smile shakily at Toothless.

The change made him cock his head, which only made my smile a little bigger. "L-looks like we match now, right bud?" I asked, jutting my chin towards his tail. Toothless looked around and lifted it, spreading his singular right fin. When he turned back to me, his eyes were wide. "Guess all that _balance_ stuff you never shut up about actually _wasn't_ just a big load of yak droppings."

He snorted, any vestige of tenderness long gone. ***"O**f _course_ it wasn't, you stupid Squish. They're very delicate, very powerful and intricate creations of the gods**."** He lifted his head, proud as always. ***"T**hey're not the only ones, of course**."**

"You realize you just called yourself delicate," I pointed out.

"_**P**__owerful_, and _intricate_**."**

"No, the word 'delicate' was definitely in that sentence there." I grinned.

***"O**bviously, your Squish ears are failing you. No big surprise there, though, they're nothing _near_ a dragon'sâ€"what're youâ€"hey**!"**

As he'd been going on, I'd reached up over my head and grabbed the bundle of feathers on the closest shelf, picked one out, and tossed it at him. It landed right on his nose, and I laughed. "At least we know you can stand a feather to the face, O Delicate One," I chuckled.

Toothless growled and shook the raven feather off. ***"I**'ll show you _delicate_**â€""**

Aaand he proceeded to lick me all over, my face and chest and

everything he could reach, even putting a paw carefully on the bed across my middle to get at me better. Laughing, I tried to shove him away. "Getâ€"get offâ€"get off me, you big arrogant lump!"

Just to spite me, he dragged his tongue one more time from my sternum to my forehead before moving back with a huge smirk on his face. Still chuckling, I wiped at the slime over my mouth and eyes, then smeared what was on my tunic. **"Y**ou dam# lizard, you know how hard it is to wash this out**!"**

It was only when I caught Dad recoiling in the corner of my eye that I realized I'd said it in Dragonese.

I froze, winced, and looked at him carefully. "Uhâ€| sorry," I said nervously, rubbing the back of my neck.

Dad's jaw clenched, but he shook his head. "Don't apologize, son. If it weren't fer you an' tha' devil o' yers, most o' the village would be settling in at FÃ³lkvangr and Valhalla." He looked between me and Toothless. "Astrid told me what she knew."

That made sense, so I just nodded. Dad paused, looking unsure and a little awkward, and when he spoke, he did so haltingly, like he was picking every other word. "I'll be willingâ€| ta listenâ€| if-if ye want." I blinked at him in surprise. "Ye keep a lot o' secrets, son, and weâ€|"

We had a lot to make up for. I knew that.

But for some reason, I stiffened. It was ridiculous, because Dad had always known about my secrets, but I couldn't help it. Maybe it was because I was so used to hiding everything from so many people. Because eventually, I'd gotten to the point where I didn't tell even him anything, even though he knew about the Gifts. Maybe it was because I'd started hiding Toothless, and everything I knew about the dragons, from everyone, no exceptions. But whatever the reason, the fact was, everything inside of me was screaming to not tell him anything. Not tell my dad anything at all.

Dad picked up on itâ€"I could see walls rise in his eyes, hiding his emotions behind them. I set my jaw and met his eyes, and he blinked and stopped whatever he was about to say.

"I-Iâ€|" I screwed my eyes shut and forced the words out. "I promise to tell you the truth," I said, my voice cracking because that was a promise I'd never made before. "From now on."

When I opened my eyes again, Dad was looking at me gently. He moved in his chair, resettling before resting one massive hand on my shoulder.

"An' I promise ta listen," he said, and I gave him a shaky smile. "From now on."

And the thing in my chest buzzed contentedlyâ€"because it knew everything would be okay. From now on.

* * *

><p>We ended up talking for hours, about every little thing that

happened. From the very moment I thought up the Mangler, right on down to what I thought I'd been doing during the Kill Ring. Everything came out into the lightâ€”the air was cleared.<p>

It was not a very calm and peaceful few hours. We fought and railed, and Dad nearly completely dismissed me a couple timesâ€

â€but every time he came close, for once, he'd actually see the way my jaw would tighten. Or it could've been Toothless giving him cues by snarling. But either way, he'd stop, take a breath, pinch the bridge of his nose, nod once, and put his hands on his lap before meeting my eyes steadily and nodding for me to continue.

The following weeks would not be easy. Dad would sometimes forget, and he'd brush me off or mutter under his breath, and I'd feel the same sting as always. During those few times Toothless wasn't around to make him realize it, I'd just ignore it until I could scream into my pillow; the only reason I didn't go out to scream in the forest, or go flying, was because my leg wasâ€ bustedâ€ and our flying equipment was even more busted.

(There were also the nightmares; I had one that same night. Several, actuallyâ€swirling flames and blindness, fear from falling into a great fire and terror as arms held me down in a dark cell, sharp glints of thin metal threaded with leather, and by Thor so much painâ€but it ended the moment a familiar black weight settled by my side and let warmth chase the fear away.)

((Those nightmares never really left. Luckily, neither did my cousin.))

It did get better, thoughâ€ eventually. But things take time, that's a fact of life. Even the gods don't fix their problems with a snap of their fingers.

Rather, they like adventures. Anyone who doesn't know their Gifts from birth has them, as they try and find them outâ€myself included.

I thought I knew what my Gifts were, because I'd been able to o so many things others couldn't, from birth. I thought my Gifts were only mine because I'd been born into a certain family.

But I was wrong; my Gifts were my own, like all Gifts should be. I found that out by finding my cousin, who is also from that family, true, but it was my own decision to befriend him. And it was him who let me see my real Giftsâ€through an adventure of my own.

The gods like to send those who don't know what their Gifts are on adventures. I've had mine, now.

(Or well. I've had my first.)

* * *

><p>Plans in order of solidity ("probably coming" to "plotbunnies unsure of the future"):
**

_**Tie for a prequel/running movie addition, and Riders/Defenders of

Berk-**_** anyone who knows Merlin well enough knows about the "Question of _" series, by Alaia Skyhawk. The series'll be a bit like that; original stories and problems mixed in or alternating with episodes. A couple scenes and a hidden-to-various-characters story line... with accompanying trust issues! :D I'm gonna go step-by-step on a rewatch and write everything down, then do my basic writing technique. With the running-movie/prequel combo, I've got research to do, a style to assume, and then the technique follows.**

Original Sequel-a basic first concept, a couple scenes, some lines...
>

How To Train Your Dragon 2-a set up and a few emotional scenes...
>

Legend of the Bone Knapper-one line, a possible scene**

Gift of the Night Fury-uh... nothing, I guess? ':D So far.
>

And the majority of this from the last week. :D Isn't having a muse by your side fun? New ideas every minute! I hope s/he/preferred pronoun doesn't try to leave, now that I've jinxed it...**

I want to thank everyone reading for joining me on this wonderful, long journey. You're all dear to my heart and the lights of my life, lifting me in bad times and joining me in the good. I wish you love, happiness, and pure joy in all your lives.

>

PEACE,

~Tibki

It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it.**_

And I feel fine.**_

End
file.